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# Time After Time: An Evaluation of Diachronic Interpretation in Traditional Historic House Museums

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Historic Preservation and Conservation

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TIME AFTER TIME:  
AN EVALUATION OF DIACHRONIC INTERPRETATION IN  
TRADITIONAL HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUMS

Kirstin Freeman Gamble

A THESIS

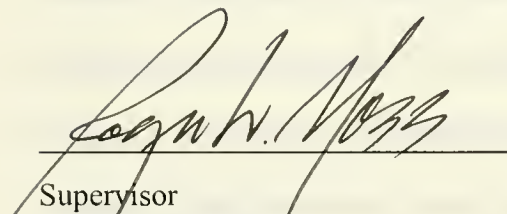
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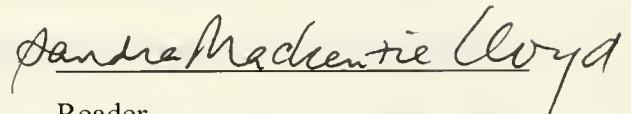
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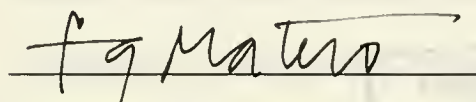
Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in  
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

2002

  
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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father, Thomas James Gamble, and to my grandfather, Paul Riccardi. Their love of building inspired my love of buildings.



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History museums constitute more than one-half of all American museums.<sup>1</sup> One reason for their prevalence is the exhaustive diversity of sites that can be categorized as history museums: battlefields, historical societies, living-history sites, traditional museums focused on the history of a particular subject, and, not least, historic house museums.<sup>2</sup> Historic house museums “are, and historically have been, the most prolific” type of history museum.<sup>3</sup> Their abundance is understandable, since “historic sites are primarily local amenities”<sup>4</sup> that commemorate regional history and attract an immediate audience. (Historic house museums with a national pull – such as Monticello or Mount Vernon – are the exception rather than the rule.) In fact, according to a survey conducted by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1989, “the number of historic properties that function in some way as museums...add[s] up to one and a third in each of the nation’s 3,092 counties and equivalent subdivisions.”<sup>5</sup>

Currently, the museum profession finds itself in the midst of an ideological shift, and historic house museums have been forced to confront the same issues faced by the field as a whole. The change in philosophy is primarily concerned with the role of *experience* versus *collections* in a museum’s mission. In *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective*, philosopher Hilde S. Hein asserts that museums today “are

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<sup>1</sup> Hilde S. Hein, *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective* (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 30.

<sup>2</sup> Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Perspective* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), xiv.

<sup>3</sup> John Sherrer, “A Timely Alternative: Telling Your Story through ‘Evolved Site’ Interpretation” (paper presented at the McFadden-Ward House Conference, Beaumont, Texas, November 2001), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Frank E. Sanchis III, “Looking Back or Looking Forward? House Museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (paper presented at the Athenaeum of Philadelphia Symposium, Philadelphia, Pa., December 1998), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Gerald George, “Historic Property Museums: What Are They Preserving?” *Preservation Forum* 2, No. 3 (Summer 1989): 2.



engaged in an entirely new enterprise aimed at eliciting thoughts and experiences in people. That objective is not exclusive of assembling collectibles, but it takes collection seriously as a means rather than an end – and by no means the only means to that end.”<sup>6</sup>

While “their presentation and interpretation of objects plays a large role in shaping our perception of ordinary living conditions as well as important events from the past,”<sup>7</sup> historic house museums have faced increasing competition from the new ways in which the twenty-first century American public experiences the past - for example, through Disney, television and films, and the Internet.<sup>8</sup> In addition, attendance at historic sites has declined in the past decade. According to one estimate, visitation at Colonial Williamsburg is down sixty percent and Sturbridge Village down forty.<sup>9</sup> The pressure to simultaneously attract, educate, and entertain the audience, coupled with an increasing financial burden, has led historic house museums to attempt to reach visitors in new ways. Consequently, states Hein, “although they still deal mostly in material objects and have expanded the range of things they collect, many history museums are now less invested in collectibles as such than in their interpretive presentation.”<sup>10</sup>

For historic house museums, this shift away from using objects as the primary interpretive tool is paradoxical. Such sites often have a wealth of stories to share with the visitor in an effort to provide a more experiential interpretation. But the fact remains that the historic house museum is itself an object. Many professionals advocate identifying

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<sup>6</sup> Hein, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Hein, 30.

<sup>8</sup> John M. Groff “To Thine Own Self Be True: The Small Historic House Museum in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (paper presented at the Athenaeum of Philadelphia Symposium, Philadelphia, Pa., December 1998), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Silberman, interview by author, Philadelphia, Pa., 11 March 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Hein, 31.



and treating historic house museums as “first and foremost houses – buildings – not museums.”<sup>11</sup> In an environment where “the transcendence of objects and the exaltation of experiences raises issues that museums have yet to address,”<sup>12</sup> there is no situation that so clearly expresses the tension between object and story as that of the traditional historic house museum.

*A traditional historic house museum* can be defined, for the purposes of this thesis, as a house museum originally preserved, restored, and opened to the public in an effort to commemorate a person or place that served an important role in the making of political or architectural history. Traditional historic house museums usually, though not always, celebrate history on a regional level. The museum world’s paradigmatic shift to experiential interpretation, as well as the acceptance of the new social history among a broad public, has led to the development of a new type of non-traditional historic house museum. Such non-traditional sites are best exemplified by the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. (Figure 1) The Tenement Museum, which is affiliated with both the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the National Park Service, is a site that admits to having had its “story” before it had its “object.” The museum was founded in order to meet a desire to tell the story of immigrants on New York City’s Lower East Side, and a tenement building was later purchased as a space in which to interpret the tenement experience.<sup>13</sup> This is in direct contrast to the traditional historic house museum

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<sup>11</sup> Sanchis, “Looking Back,” 2.

<sup>12</sup> Hein, 68.

<sup>13</sup> This practice raises interesting questions about the stories that are told, since the lives interpreted for the visitors at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum are those of individuals who actually lived in the building. Their stories are interpreted because they lived in the tenement that was purchased by the museum for the purpose of interpreting the tenement experience, suggesting that stories about tenement life are interchangeable. The building determines what stories are being told and so the object retains its power over the story even in a non-traditional historic house museum setting.





movement, in which buildings were preserved for their specific affiliations or aesthetic qualities.

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum – considered by many to be the most innovative and relevant of today’s historic house museums – interprets five different periods at its site ranging from the 1870s to the 1930s. Accordingly, the visitor experiences the history of the building in a *diachronic* fashion; that is, the visitor witnesses many different layers of the building’s history on a tour that presents a “walk through time.” Such a diachronic interpretation ostensibly provides a holistic history that does not purport to simply recreate one moment in time. However, at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, the diachronic effect is achieved by installing each apartment as a different period. Because the tenement building houses separate apartments that are each interpreted individually, it might be argued that rather than experiencing the site diachronically, visitors to the site actually visit five separate “moments in time,” five miniature house museums housed in one building.

Traditional historic house museums have long used diachronic interpretation to interpret *multi-generational sites*, sites where members of the same family used a house over successive generations. Wyck, a historic house museum in Philadelphia, is an excellent example of the multi-generational historic house museum, serving as the “home to nine generations of a Quaker family...from 1689 to 1973.”<sup>14</sup> (Figure 2) The tens of thousands of family artifacts owned by the Wyck Association provide a sense of “life to

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<sup>14</sup> Groff, “To Thine Own Self Be True,” 2-3.





the house, and whimsy and surprise, as well as beauty.”<sup>15</sup> Interpreted together, as a family home that has accumulated layers of material culture rather than as a series of period rooms, visitors experience the idea that “people have things from the past, memories and possessions they carry with them.”<sup>16</sup> In fact, most of Wyck’s visitors respond to the layered interpretation by relating it to their own personal experiences, expressing that “this is like my grandmother’s house” or “I could live here.”<sup>17</sup>

In general, multi-generational sites have always been interpreted diachronically because they were preserved from the start for their affiliation with a particular family and for their longevity as a family home. Increasingly, however, traditional historic house museums that do not have a multi-generational history have been turning to diachronic interpretation in an attempt to forge such a personal connection with their visitors. These sites have reinterpreted themselves from sites that display one moment in a building’s history to sites that interpret a broader story through a series of period rooms. This thesis focuses on just such historic house museums – traditional sites that are not multi-generational in nature, but which are choosing to interpret more than one period reflecting different owners or uses through the installation of period rooms.

Chapter One addresses the motivating factors that have led to the rise in interest in diachronic interpretation for traditional historic house museums. As briefly noted in this introduction, much of the impetus for such a change derives from a philosophical shift in museum studies from an object-oriented to a story-oriented interpretation, a transition that is uneasy for historic house museums because of their fundamental nature as objects

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<sup>15</sup> Groff, “To Thine Own Self Be True,” 4.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Schreiber, interview by author, Washington, D.C., 25 January 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Jeff Groff, interview by author, Philadelphia, Pa., 8 November 2001.



themselves. Chapter Two evaluates the efficacy of diachronic interpretation in this setting through an analysis of practical factors such as the demographics of the house museum audience and the personality-oriented nature of such projects. Chapter Three focuses on the physical ramifications that diachronic interpretation (which is often diachronic *reinterpretation*) has for the historic house museum.

Each chapter is followed by a case study that illuminates the concepts set forth in the preceding chapter. The case studies have been chosen for their relevance to the topics covered in each chapter, as well as for their diversity. The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA) is in the process of reinterpreting the Harrison Gray Otis House from a fixed period to a “walk through time” approach, while the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) Decatur House is pursuing the opposite sort of reinterpretation at Decatur House, shifting from two periods back to one. The Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission (PHMC) reinterpreted Hope Lodge from a site that interpreted five different periods to one that compares between two, the Colonial and the Colonial Revival.

The professionalization of the museum field has been a key factor in the ideological shift and growing popularity of diachronic interpretation in traditional historic house museums. Ironically, this shift has often left museum professionals unable to innovate or celebrate their site’s uniqueness. Hein asserts:

museums have descended from the heaven of authoritative certainty to inhabit the flatlands of doubt. That movement could have inspired venturesome individuality and exploratory novelty; in most instances, however, doubt has led to cautious self-censorship and timid understatement. It has brought progressively more uniformity as museums hedge their bets by covering all possibilities. The more they celebrate diversity, the more indiscernible museums have grown from one another



and from other public institutions; the more emphasis they place on professionalism, the more standardized their practice becomes.<sup>18</sup>

This thesis will attempt to prove that the introduction of diachronic interpretation through the use of period rooms is a reflection of the standardization accompanying museum professionalization. In most cases, it is used as a stop-gap measure meant to share new scholarship with the audience while maintaining elements of the traditional historic house museum setting. However, the installation of period rooms does not allow historic house museums to exploit the very resource that makes them singular, the idea of the house or home itself. By creating a sort of zoo, wherein one room of each style is exhibited in a row, the visitor loses any sense of that which makes a historic house museum special: the way in which the household worked as a whole.

Some museum professionals contend that sites choosing to emphasize story over object “ignore at great peril the very things that make museums distinctive.”<sup>19</sup> This thesis asserts that interpreting the household as a whole celebrates *both* the object and the story in that it reveals, more than diachronic interpretation can, “what we are really after: an understanding of *how* society worked in the past.”<sup>20</sup> The story is undoubtedly as important as the object in today’s museum climate, but the connection between the two must be carefully considered in the case of the traditional historic house museum.

This is not to say that diachronic interpretation is never an appropriate choice for historic house museums. Successful installations can allow for clear and concise comparisons between periods. However, house museums must be aware of the unique

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<sup>18</sup> Hein, 142.

<sup>19</sup> Ettema, 64.

<sup>20</sup> Ettema, 76.



and irreplaceable qualities that set them apart from other historic sites. These qualities, supplemented through technology, scholarship, and partnerships, can reach an audience as effectively as diachronic interpretation, and with a longer-lasting impact.





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THE MOTIVATIONS FOR DIACHRONIC INTERPRETATION

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*Historic Attitudes Toward House Museum Interpretation*

An understanding of historic attitudes toward house museum interpretation is essential in order to evaluate the contemporary turn toward diachronic installations. Most historic house museum interpretation continues to derive from the two opposing perspectives set forth in the early days of the historic house movement: preserving a story versus preserving an object. This fundamental tension has shifted in recent years, expressing new theories in social history and museum studies, to one of the formalist perspective, which “stresses history as a factual learning about the past” (or object-centered interpretation) versus the analytical, which “attempts to teach not just what happened, but how and why it happened” (or story-based interpretation).<sup>1</sup> Today’s reinterpretations represent, in many ways, an attempt to reconcile these two disparate motives. In this way diachronic interpretation is a logical next step in the evolution of historic house museum interpretation.

This country’s first historic house museums were established in the years before the Civil War because of their patriotic association with George Washington. Hasbrouck House, the site of Washington’s Revolutionary War headquarters, and more famously his home Mount Vernon, were preserved and opened to the public to offer, in the words of orator Edward Everett, “a common heritage for the estranged children of a common

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Ettema, “History Museums and the Culture of Materialism,” in *Past Meets Present: Essays about Historic Interpretation and Public Audiences* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 63.



father.”<sup>2</sup> Although the creation of these sites failed to prevent the Civil War, they established a criterion for saving historic buildings as house museums. Many nineteenth-century house museums continued to be associated with Revolutionary War heroes and “perceived by their defenders as hallowed shrines where heroic events had occurred.”<sup>3</sup> They served as patriotic shrines “esteemed for their associative value, rather than for themselves or for their relation to their surroundings.”<sup>4</sup>

A second criterion for saving historic buildings for use as museums began to emerge as the nineteenth century drew to a close. Since the first generation of historic house museums were preserved “for the inspiration of visitors, considerations of architecture or of beauty seldom entered into their calculations.”<sup>5</sup> Organizations like the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA) “began opening houses to the public based not on the fame of their inhabitants but on their antiquity and architectural significance.”<sup>6</sup>

Despite a difference in rationale, these object-based museums (for the building itself was the most important object of all) retained a didactic program similar to those that sought to preserve sites of patriotic importance. The surge in the number of house museums between 1895 and 1910 reflected, according to historian Michael Wallace, a class culture whose “longstanding cultural and political authority [was] suddenly being

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<sup>2</sup> Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Coolidge and Nancy Padnos, “William Sumner Appleton and the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities,” *Antiques* 129, no. 3 (March 1986): 590-594.

<sup>4</sup> Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., *Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States before Williamsburg* (New York: Putnam, 1965), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Hosmer, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Perspective* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), xvi.



challenged”<sup>7</sup> by immigration and rapid industrialization. During this period, “patriotism became a kind of secular religion in urban American society where old standards were dissolving.”<sup>8</sup> Historic house museums – whether object or story-oriented – bolstered their founders’ sense of legitimacy and simultaneously taught a “love of country”<sup>9</sup> to new Americans.

The next decades saw not a shift in interpretive thrust but rather the development of new sorts of history museums, most notably the outdoor or open air museum exemplified by Greenfield Village and Colonial Williamsburg. Such museums represented “an expansion of the historic-house concept”<sup>10</sup> and should be mentioned in any discussion of diachronic interpretation. In many ways they were the earliest attempt to reconcile object and story. Outdoor history museums were related to the historic houses preserved by SPNEA in that they developed out of a Scandinavian tradition that valued pre-industrial craftsmanship, blending “romantic nostalgia with dismay at the emergence of capitalist social relations.”<sup>11</sup> They were also related to more story-based sites in their attempt to impart moral inspiration through an overwhelming collection of patriotic shrines, including (at Greenfield Village) a traditional New England town green, Noah Webster’s house, Thomas Edison’s laboratory, and a courthouse from Abraham Lincoln’s days as a lawyer. At Colonial Williamsburg, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., preserved not just one colonial house but an entire “exquisite little eighteenth-century

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<sup>7</sup> Wallace, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Hosmer, 88.

<sup>9</sup> Edward P. Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Function of Museums* (Nashville: American Association of State and Local History, 1979), 88.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander, 91.

<sup>11</sup> Wallace, 11.





town, clean, tidy, and tasteful”<sup>12</sup> in an attempt “to bring the colonial capital back to life.”<sup>13</sup>

In the 1960s, traditional historic house museums experienced a second period of growth. A survey undertaken by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1989 disclosed that almost sixty percent – or three out of five – historic property museums were established after 1960.<sup>14</sup> The reasons for this were several: first, the country was now old enough to have a sense of perspective on its past, a sense of history. This was underscored by preparations for the Bicentennial and local anniversaries. Second, a “revived scholarly interest in social history”<sup>15</sup> occurred during the last decades of the twentieth century, leading to an “increasing tendency of social historians to find employment in museums – joining curatorial and decorative arts specialists in place for several generations.”<sup>16</sup> For nearly a century volunteer groups on a largely local scale had been responsible for preserving and interpreting the nation’s history through house museums. The 1960s and 70s saw the beginning of the professionalization of the house museum field. Though the movement has been slow (the same National Trust survey revealed that sixty-five percent of historic property museums have no full-time, compensated staff), professionalization has made the most significant impact on historic house interpretation in the past fifty years.

Whereas the founders of early historic house museums used their sites to assert

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<sup>12</sup> Wallace, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander, 91.

<sup>14</sup> Gerald George, “Historic Property Museums: What Are They Preserving?” *Preservation Forum* 2, No. 3 (Summer 1989): 2-4.

<sup>15</sup> Leon and Rosenzweig, xvii.

<sup>16</sup> Ettema, 62.





“those qualities thought to be essential to social order: individualism, self-reliance, economic initiative, courage, simplicity, honesty, and taste,”<sup>17</sup> many new museum professionals, who came from social history rather than decorative arts backgrounds, “emphatically reject[ed] the idea that the future of the Republic depends on mass-conformity to genteel notions of cultivation and propriety. Less and less [did they] indulge in a blatant ancestor worship of the idea that the artifacts of our ancestors will provide us with moral courage.”<sup>18</sup> The new social history emphasized accuracy and completeness of research in addition to advocating for the interpretation of a larger social context. Historic sites now found themselves interpreting women, slaves, and servants through a combination of entirely *new museums*, like the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, which celebrates immigrant life, and the *reinterpretation of existing house museums*. Some of the latter “abandoned the filiopietistic approach (in some cases only after considerable internal conflict), and insisted on rigorous standards of historical accuracy.... Many developed imaginative strategies for creating a more comprehensive portrait of past communities.”<sup>19</sup> This new social history has proved a key factor in the increasing popularity of diachronic interpretation and will be discussed at greater length later in this chapter.

A concrete example of the professionalization of history museums during the period is the publication of the only two books devoted to site interpretation, Freeman Tilden’s *Interpreting Our Heritage* (1957) and William T. Alderson and Shirley Payne Low’s *Interpretation of Historic Sites* (1976). The former focuses on national

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<sup>17</sup> Ettema, 68.

<sup>18</sup> Ettema, 71.

<sup>19</sup> Wallace, 22.



parks, mentioning historic sites within that context. Tilden notes that “interpretation is a growth whose effectiveness depends on regular nourishment by well-directed and discriminating research,”<sup>20</sup> and sets forth six principles to guide interpretation, focusing on engaging the visitor. The principle that holds the most relevance for a discussion of diachronic interpretation is number five, in which Tilden states “a cardinal purpose of Interpretation...is to present a whole rather than a part, no matter how interesting the specific part may be.”<sup>21</sup> This, of course, may be read in two ways: that a house should interpret its whole history, rather than one moment in time, as advocated through diachronic interpretation, or alternatively that period rooms do not sufficiently capture a sense of the house as a whole.

Alderson and Low begin their work by noting that in early historic house museums “there was little interpretation, because the average visitor had prior knowledge of what he was seeing.” The patriotic shrine was just one element to developing a knowledge of history, supplemented by the educational curriculum and an oral tradition shared “by parents and grandparents who personally remembered the battles and leaders.” The authors assert that by the end of the twentieth century this was an outdated notion, since “history, particularly state and local history, has been relegated to a less important position in the curriculum [and] people move often so that homes in which three or four generations of a family once perpetuated the oral tradition are virtually things of the past.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Tilden, 40.

<sup>22</sup> William T. Alderson and Shirley Payne Low, *Interpretation of Historic Sites*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1996), 4-5.



While interpretive strategies may not have been conscious or educated decisions during the first wave of historic house museums, those sites were certainly “interpreted” for the visitor in the way that Alderson and Low suggest later sites be interpreted. The message was simply different. Alderson and Low advocate a multi-layered, conscious interpretation that moves beyond a one-dimensional recitation of fact, noting that:

the site was saved and restored because it had historical value; it is therefore important that the visitor understand what that value was. He must also understand *what the historical value is today* – and the site organization should recognize at the outset that historical value is not something fixed for all time, but something changing with new perspectives and new audiences.<sup>23</sup> (Italics added.)

Interpretation at today’s sites – at least the professionally operated ones – is far more self-aware than that at earlier counterparts.

The professionalization of historic house museums clearly links to the object-versus-story debate that first appeared in the earliest historic sites. Many professionals have adopted the analytical, or story-based, approach in their work with historic house museums. With “a growing awareness that the way ordinary people lived their lives in the past had an effect on the way we live our ordinary lives in the present,” historians and academics attempt “an understanding of *how* society worked in the past.”<sup>24</sup> This interpretive thrust uses material culture as a backdrop; “objects seem to take second place, becoming illustrations for labels rather than significant elements in the learning process.”<sup>25</sup>

The analytical perspective seems inherently unsuited for historic house museums

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<sup>23</sup> Alderson and Low, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Ettema, 75-6.

<sup>25</sup> Ettema, 77.





in which, as noted above, the building itself is one large formalist object. In addition, “it is an inescapable fact that museum visitors respond more directly and immediately to objects than to verbalized concepts.”<sup>26</sup> So how are historic sites to combine what they do best – interpreting material culture for the visitor – in a way that moves beyond nostalgia for a simpler way of life or “simply learning about the objects themselves”?<sup>27</sup> How can they embrace professionalization, historical accuracy, and connecting the past to the present without losing sight of their unique and distinctive position as tangible expressions of another era? For many sites, diachronic interpretation has become an option for reconciling these disparate perspectives.

The essential threads that weave through the history of house museum interpretation – object versus story, a movement toward accuracy in historical research, an engagement of the visitor beyond the simple facts, and an awareness that house museums reflect the present as much as they do the past – continue to impact today’s historic sites. Diachronic interpretation is a response to the history of the house museum profession, and it reflects issues of contemporary scholarship, increasing visitation and stabilizing finances. The remainder of this chapter outlines the factors, both practical and philosophical, that lead to a consideration of diachronic interpretation.

### ***Improved Scholarship***

Most historic house museum professionals cite improved scholarship as the primary factor driving an institutional interest in diachronic interpretation.<sup>28</sup> The

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<sup>26</sup> Ettema, 77.

<sup>27</sup> Ettema, 72.

<sup>28</sup> This opinion was expressed by every professional interviewed for this thesis.





professionalization of history museums has led to an increased commitment to accuracy in research, invariably leading to an interest in sharing the whole, true story of the site with visitors. This commitment also asks sites to correct any historical inaccuracies or inconsistencies that may be undermining the integrity of the current interpretation.

This scholarship took root in the new social history that first appeared during the 1960s and 70s and continues to hold considerable sway over historic house museum interpretation today. The movement, often identified by the phrase “history from the bottom up,” emphasizes “a concern for the long-neglected masses of people who did not sign famous documents, make famous inventions, or assassinate famous statesmen...[and] also points to an interest in the minutest details of everyday life such as diet, hygiene, sex roles, housing patterns, work habits, and family ties.”<sup>29</sup>

Anthropologists Eric Gable and Richard Handler conducted an in-depth survey of the new social history as it evolved at Colonial Williamsburg, perhaps the most visible historic site in the country. Their experience at Colonial Williamsburg, while admittedly on a larger and more public scale, mirrors the considerations that small historic sites undertake when evaluating potential reinterpretation. In fact, the Colonial Williamsburg historians responsible for bringing the new social history to their site served as consultants to SPNEA when it first began its discussions about introducing diachronic interpretation at the Harrison Gray Otis House.

Gable and Handler identify two attitudes toward history making: realist and constructionist. The former asserts that history changes as new facts are uncovered through the course of continuing and improved research. This process enables historians

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<sup>29</sup> Ettema, 75.



“to write histories better than those that were written before – ‘better’ in the sense of more accurate, closer to the truth of the past as it really was.”<sup>30</sup> The irony of this approach is that past interpretations are continually relegated to erroneous status, while the facts interpreted in the present tense are set forth as true, with no indication that they may soon be outdated as well.

Alternatively, some professionals look at history making in a constructionist manner, acknowledging “the construction of history depends on the viewpoint of historians, on the messages or meanings that historians choose (perhaps unconsciously) to convey.”<sup>31</sup> In addition to interpreting a broader portrait of the past, Williamsburg’s new social historians “also wanted to emphasize that history itself is a construct – a selective and willed account of a past that draws moral and political lessons that are shaped by current preoccupations and agendas.”<sup>32</sup> This approach is also ironic, in that the new social history itself is simply one more ideology shaping the “moral and political lessons” that are told in historic house museums. It reflects the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in much the same way that patriotic shrines, which today might seem naïve and self-serving, reflected the culture of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

While the new social history has been embraced by museum professionals, the fact remains that “communities tend to turn the homes of the rich and famous into museums, rather than preserving the typical or representative.”<sup>33</sup> This is often attributed to the fact that historic house museums have difficulties escaping their founders’

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 70.

<sup>31</sup> Handler and Gable, 59.

<sup>32</sup> Handler and Gable, 78.

<sup>33</sup> George, 4.



motivations or donors' ideals. In the case of Colonial Williamsburg, "scholars...have all noted that, despite the turn to social history, the museum continues to reproduce the hegemonic perspective of the upper classes. In explaining why this is so, these critics often implicate the foundation's elitist leadership and its upper-class patrons or blame its upper-middle-class audience."<sup>34</sup> Another criticism of the new social history is its "uncritical embrace" of formerly neglected subjects, ultimately "producing the same sort of celebratory history found in traditional great man accounts."<sup>35</sup>

The movement has inarguably influenced recent house museum interpretation. In addition to the appearance of sites devoted to non-traditional subjects like immigrant or industrial history, traditional house museums are expanding their interpretation to consider servants and slaves, women and children. The new social history has also raised the bar, forcing traditional sites to question how they can best physically exhibit the new history they are presenting. Diachronic interpretation is undoubtedly a product of this culture. First, it allows sites to tell their whole story – or at least more of their story than is currently being told – in true constructionist manner. Carolyn Wahto, Site Manager of the Harrison Gray Otis House, which interprets the Federal-era home of politician and real estate speculator Harry Otis circa 1796, notes that "we are not telling the whole story. The Otises were only here for four years."<sup>36</sup> Using diachronic interpretation, visitors will be able to "walk through time," experiencing the house's entire history as a Turkish bath, boarding house, and the first headquarters of SPNEA.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Handler and Gable, 122.

<sup>35</sup> Leon and Rosenzweig, xviii.

<sup>36</sup> Carolyn Wahto, phone interview by author, 2 November 2001.

<sup>37</sup> The diachronic reinterpretation of the Harrison Gray Otis House is detailed in the case study at the end of this chapter.





Diachronic interpretation also asks sites to be more accurate and to correct past mistakes, as the realists espouse. Such a reinterpretation is by necessity holistic, effecting all rooms of the house, and cannot be undertaken in a piecemeal fashion. It requires extensive research, often leading to the discovery that part of the history currently interpreted is mistaken. At Decatur House, a National Trust property in Washington, D.C., for example, the room long interpreted as Stephen Decatur's office and bedchamber was recently discovered to have actually been the kitchen. This piece of evidence was critical in interpreting Benjamin Latrobe's design for the house, which places a major service space in a location of considerable importance. The discovery, made during research for a diachronic installation, was of such importance that the house is now being reinstalled to one period.<sup>38</sup> The research involved to undertake diachronic interpretation forces sites to consider what stories they can tell *best*, not simply what story they would like to tell.

### ***Practical Motivations***

There are, of course, more practical reasons for historic house museums to consider reinterpreting their sites to represent more than one period or owner. The interrelated issues of reaching out to new audiences and increasing financial viability are realistic pressures that today's house museums cannot escape. Some historic houses have identified diachronic interpretation as a method for meeting these goals.

As noted above, the new social history presents a more holistic view of the past than that presented by early historic house museums. It concerns itself with issues of

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<sup>38</sup> Decatur House is discussed in detail at the end of Chapter Three.





women, children, African-Americans, and immigrants. Many historic house museum professionals see the new social history as a way to attract new audiences to their site, ones with personal connections to these formerly ignored populations. In fact, when this holistic view made its appearance at Colonial Williamsburg during the 1970s, the site was experiencing “a time of declining visitation.”<sup>39</sup>

It is only logical that houses interpreting more than one period have an even greater chance of connecting with a broader audience on this personal level. In addition, historic houses with diachronic interpretation are in the unique position of appealing to an important marketing target – the young visitor. When set up as a series of period rooms, diachronic installations mimic the patterns by which modern audiences typically receive information, that is, the television or internet. Such ‘sound bite’ interpretations may be the inevitable result of the “contemporary world where museums must vie for audiences pummeled with constantly evolving forms of information technology, opportunities for education, and outlets for entertainment.”<sup>40</sup>

Such interpretations are also more accessible to a young audience in that they have an increased chance of meeting school curriculum standards for different grade levels, ensuring repeat visitation by school groups. The Morris-Jumel Mansion in New York City is a historic house museum that focuses primarily on European decorative arts of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet the one bedroom installed to appear the way it may have

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<sup>39</sup> Handler and Gable, 4.

<sup>40</sup> John Sherrer, “A Timely Alternative: Telling Your Story through ‘Evolved Site’ Interpretation” (paper presented at the McFadden-Ward House Conference, Beaumont, Texas, November 2001), 2. The success of these efforts to reach new audiences will be explored in Chapter Two.



when George Washington occupied the house during the fall of 1776 is “most successful for school programming because it meets the New York State curriculum.”<sup>41</sup>

Despite the laudable goal of reaching a broader cross-section of the public, an additional benefit to finding new audiences is increasing visitation statistics and, ostensibly, funding. As Gable and Handler point out when discussing Colonial Williamsburg, “if the social historians were to change the history that [the site] told, they would have to prove that a new history was what their audiences wanted, or at least that revisionism could be compatible with commercial viability.”<sup>42</sup> Fifty-four percent of the historic sites surveyed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1989 had fewer than 5,000 visitors per year. Since many historic sites “are financially dependent on earned income, low visitation at so many of them may be...grounds for concern.”<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, most historic house museums are in a constant state of financial peril. Of the more than 5,000 historic property sites identified through the Trust survey, nearly eighty percent operated with an annual budget of less than \$50,000.<sup>44</sup> In regions with a high density of historic properties, like Philadelphia, house museums are in competition with each other not only for visitors, but for funding as well.

Funders can have an enormous impact on what history is interpreted. Just as the earliest historic house museums presented an agenda that matched their founders’ (and funders’) interests, house museums today must also take into consideration what projects are likely to attract funding. This factor, whose importance cannot be overstated,

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<sup>41</sup> Kenneth Snodgrass, phone interview by author, 17 January 2002.

<sup>42</sup> Handler and Gable, 5-6.

<sup>43</sup> George, 3.

<sup>44</sup> George, 3.



manifests itself in both obvious and subtle ways. Controversial topics might be avoided because they are not fundable, therefore “produc[ing] distorted or sanitized versions of the past.”<sup>45</sup> More germane to the issue of diachronic interpretation specifically is the notion that funders are looking for new and innovative ideas, not simply to pay for the upgrade of an existing installation. Peter Gittelman, Director of Interpretation and Public Programming for SPNEA, admits that it was difficult to securing funding when the Otis House’s 1970s installation began to look “stale.” Since grantmakers would not pay for an aesthetic upgrade without a change in programming, the Society was forced to look at new options. This was one of the primary motivating factors in their decision to install rooms from different periods as part of the reinterpretation.<sup>46</sup>

The guidelines for the Heritage Investment Program’s interpretive programming grants echo quite clearly the reasoning that many historic house museum professionals use in advocating diachronic interpretation. The grants, which are funded through the Pew Charitable Trust, “are made for the purpose of offering humanities-based, scholarly, entertaining and engaging interpretation....Programs and exhibits should demonstrate innovative forms of presentation and address new and/or underrepresented themes in American history.” The guidelines go on to request that interpretation “engage the visitor in connecting the past to the present and the future.”<sup>47</sup> Barbara Silberman, the current Director of the Heritage Investment Program, believes that historic house museums should look to create innovative programming, especially because the majority are not interpreted well to begin with. She feels that “there seems to be more of a focus on the

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<sup>45</sup> Leon and Rosenzweig, xix.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Gittelman, phone interview by author, 31 October 2001.

<sup>47</sup> *Heritage Investment Program Grant Guidelines 2001*, 9.





artifacts and the building than on the story, and anything that would tell the story better would be automatically more appealing” to funders.<sup>48</sup>

The issue of collections and their impact on interpretation relate in many ways to funding. Max van Balgooy, Director of Education and Interpretation at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, notes that fifty years ago, a room filled with objects from different periods would not have been problematic to the visitor or the historic house museum staff. The reaction to recent scholarship, however, has been to move beyond furnishing rooms to reflect primarily aesthetic sensibilities and to interpret how the space actually would have appeared.<sup>49</sup> But this can present a financial difficulty for small house museums, many of which have neither the physical nor financial resources to accurately furnish a house.

The Morris-Jumel Mansion (Figure 3) is an excellent example of how collections can be the driving force behind diachronic interpretation. The house currently interprets three different periods, and has interpreted multiple periods for nearly a century. The drawing room is interpreted to 1765, reflecting the first occupants of the house, Colonel Roger Morris and his family. Another recently installed room is meant to interpret the brief period during 1776 when Washington occupied the house as part of his Revolutionary War campaigns. The majority of the rooms are interpreted to the 1830s, the tenure of Madame Eliza Jumel, a woman “whose rise from the dregs of society to the

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<sup>48</sup> Barbara Silberman, interview by author, Philadelphia, Pa., 11 March 2002.

<sup>49</sup> Max van Balgooy, interview by author, Washington, D.C., 25 January 2002.





position of patroness of a French countess has provided an example of the fantastic in real life that has made it difficult to separate fact and fiction in her history.”<sup>50</sup>

Kenneth Snodgrass, the former Curator of the Mansion, admits that “room installations have been guided by the existence of collections.”<sup>51</sup> Despite the fact that the house was established by the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1906 as the “Washington’s Headquarters Association,” Jumel furniture, including French Empire pieces, was purchased for the historic house museum as early as 1916. As a result, “Morris rooms have fallen in where there wasn’t other furniture.”<sup>52</sup>

In this case, diachronic interpretation was an unexpected byproduct of a reliance on Trustees’ and other donors’ gifts of collections. The Morris-Jumel Mansion is fortunate in that much of its collection is of high quality; other small house museums do not have that luxury and are severely limited by the tension between the professional ideals of accuracy and honesty and the economic difficulties of acquiring collections.

It is clear that there is a focused list of ideological and practical issues that historic house museums, like all history museums, face today. A desire to improve accuracy and present a broad story, a need for funding and increased visitation, and the resources of the individual historic house museum are all factors that lead sites to turn to diachronic interpretation. The installation of period rooms may seem to be a panacea for the struggling historic house museum, but as Chapters Two and Three will show, diachronic

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<sup>50</sup> Helen Comstock, “History in Houses: The Morris-Jumel Mansion in New York,” *Antiques* 59 (March 1951): 216.

<sup>51</sup> Snodgrass, interview.

<sup>52</sup> Snodgrass, interview.



installation is difficult to execute well and requires significant changes in all areas of museum operations.

***Case Study: The Harrison Gray Otis House, Boston, Massachusetts***

The Harrison Gray Otis House (Figure 4) is the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities' flagship property and the last remaining freestanding eighteenth-century townhouse in Boston. It is atypical of SPNEA's properties in that it currently interprets one moment in time – as it would have appeared just after its first owners, Harry and Sally Otis, entertained friends for dinner. The majority of the Society's historic house museums take their visitors on a “walk through time,”<sup>53</sup> in which “structural changes made by different generations and the resultant layering of objects and decorative schemes portray American society and architectural history with unparalleled vividness.”<sup>54</sup> Over the past several years, the movement toward diachronic interpretation at the Otis House has been debated, planned, scaled back, and is now moving forward. As a historic house museum and the headquarters of SPNEA since 1916, the Otis House “reflects the changing ways in which historic buildings have been appreciated and interpreted in the twentieth century.”<sup>55</sup> For the purposes of this study, it is an exemplary case of the traditional historic house museum attempting to reinvent itself to be professionally cutting-edge and financially viable.

Charles Bulfinch designed the house for his childhood friend, the budding

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<sup>53</sup> Wahto, interview.

<sup>54</sup> Coolidge and Padnos, 593.

<sup>55</sup> Richard Nylander, “The First Harrison Gray Otis House, Boston, Massachusetts,” *Antiques* 129, no. 3 (March 1986): 620.



politician and real estate developer Harrison Gray Otis, in 1795 – the first, and most modest, of three townhouses that Bulfinch was to design for Otis. In a 1975 discussion of the house for *Antiques* magazine, Richard Nylander, SPNEA's Curator of Collections, writes that Otis's tenure in the house:

parallels his career in national politics, so one may wonder how much time he actually spent in it. In the spring of 1797, just as he and his wife Sally and their four small children moved in, he went to Philadelphia to serve his first term in Congress. Not until 1801 did he withdraw from Federal politics and return to Boston.<sup>56</sup>

The family only lived in their “starter home” for four years, moving in 1801 from the Bowdoin Square neighborhood where Bulfinch and Otis had grown up, onto Beacon Hill as part of the speculative real estate scheme that was to make the latter even wealthier.

Throughout the rest of its two-hundred year history, the Otis House served as the home of another wealthy merchant, John Osborn; it was divided down the middle and used by “Dr. and Mrs. Mott, ‘the celebrated Female Physician’ for a ‘Select Establishment for invalid ladies and gentlemen with their Wives;’”<sup>57</sup> and was converted into two boarding houses, one more genteel than the next. SPNEA purchased the Otis House as its headquarters in 1916.

SPNEA intended the house for use as a public museum from the outset. Initially, “only the second floor withdrawing room was furnished to reflect the Otis period,”<sup>58</sup> but in 1926, with the movement of office space to adjacent rowhouses, all rooms on the first

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<sup>56</sup> Nylander, Richard. “The First Harrison Gray Otis House.” *Antiques* 107 (June 1975): 1132.

<sup>57</sup> Nylander, “The First Harrison Gray Otis House,” 1133. Recent research has indicated that Mrs. Mott, who used the Otis House as a frontispiece for her 1834 book *The Ladies' Medical Oracle: or, Mrs. Mott's Advice to Young Females, Wives, and Mothers*, used steam aromatherapy baths and massage to treat her patients.

<sup>58</sup> Nylander, “The First Harrison Gray Otis House,” 1133.





two floors of the house were used as exhibit space. They were not immediately outfitted as period rooms, but rather as a museum of New England culture, with decorative arts and display cases of artifacts entirely filling the space. (Figure 5) In 1932, the bicentennial of George Washington's birth was celebrated with "a commemorative exhibition of Georgian and Federal furnishings, some of them associated with Washington."<sup>59</sup>

In 1970, SPNEA undertook a restoration of the Otis House that would prove to be groundbreaking. Using "the latest scholarship...it was interpreted as a whole rather than as a series of period rooms."<sup>60</sup> Technologies like paint and wallpaper analysis were employed to faithfully recreate the interiors from the Otis and Osborn periods, from 1796 to 1820. The "results were unforeseen and...somewhat surprising in terms of what is commonly thought of as being typically Federal."<sup>61</sup> Nylander writes that the restoration of the Otis hues "reveal[ed] combinations of colors that may seem somewhat discordant to modern taste. Their veracity [was] corroborated, however, by contemporary pictorial sources which serve as a stern reminder that Federal taste in design and color is not necessarily ours today."<sup>62</sup> (These pictorial sources included Henry Sargent's *The Tea Party* and *The Dinner Party*. These paintings were important sources for use in the Otis House restoration, as they depict nineteenth-century Boston interiors designed by Charles Bulfinch; the same two paintings have been used since in many historic house interpretations, including the Octagon in Washington, D.C.) Nylander noted that "the

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<sup>59</sup> Nylander, "The First Harrison Gray Otis House in Boston, Massachusetts," 620.

<sup>60</sup> Nylander, "The First Harrison Gray Otis House in Boston, Massachusetts," 620.

<sup>61</sup> Nylander, "The First Harrison Gray Otis House," 1133.

<sup>62</sup> Nylander, "The First Harrison Gray Otis House," 1138.





interiors of the Otis house are not intended to remain static. As more pieces associated with Otis and Osborn turn up and scholarship contributes new insights into the original furnishings, it is hoped that the house will reflect with increasing accuracy the Federal period in Boston.”<sup>63</sup>

The 1970 interpretation of the Otis house was undertaken on a room-by-room basis, without a comprehensive interpretive plan. Though it was “cutting edge” when first completed, by the late 1990s SPNEA wanted to take advantage of new research to create a “top-notch” interpretation worthy of its flagship house museum.<sup>64</sup> To do so, the Society embarked on a five-year planning process, hoping to create a strategic plan that would develop “engaging ways for the audience of the twenty-first century to experience and value history, using the Otis House as a model and laboratory experiment of new methods of historic house exhibition and interpretation.”<sup>65</sup> The Otis House reinterpretation, originally slated to cost \$3.5 million, would be “technologically cutting edge,” featuring pumped in smells and noises. It would also introduce rooms from different eras into the house.

Diachronic interpretation was not a new concept for SPNEA. As noted above, many of the Society’s sites are multi-generational; others, like the Spencer-Peirce-Little Farm (Figure 6), interpret centuries of different owners through the use of period rooms. The opportunity presented by the Otis House was unique, however, in that the building had varied uses over its history (only serving as a single-family house for a brief fraction of that time), and in that those uses reflected the gradual decline of Boston’s West End.

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<sup>63</sup> Nylander, “The First Harrison Gray Otis House,” 1140.

<sup>64</sup> Wahto, interview.

<sup>65</sup> Wahto, interview.



Urban renewal projects of the 1960s had destroyed virtually all historic fabric in the West End, and the Otis House found itself in the position of a rare survivor and the last witness to the neighborhood's history.

The decision to incorporate period rooms into the Otis House was not initially proposed by the SPNEA staff that made up the reinterpretation committee. The process began with the acknowledgment that “the house needed a facelift” since the 1970s restoration was now thirty years old.<sup>66</sup> Meeting minutes from the project's early stages reveal that members of the committee “believed the installation still works” and “noted the consistency of the interior and exterior architecture” as an important example of the complete Federal aesthetic. One later advocate of diachronic reinterpretation felt during these initial discussions that “the ‘moment in time’ tour approach enhance[d]” visitors’ experience at the house. The staff did agree to “the importance of rethinking the display in the light of new research,” as “those who truly know the period will find flaws. The interpretation focuses on the four-year residency of the Otises, but the material culture seen by the visitors spans 30 years.”<sup>67</sup> These comments reflect that, though other SPNEA sites interpreted more than one period, early discussions about reinterpreting the Otis House did not focus on the option of diachronic interpretation. Rather, staff were focused on improving the accuracy of the existing interpretation. Suggestions as to how this might be done included moving Sally Otis’s bedchamber and using the newly transcribed Otis correspondence to add to the interpretation of Sally Otis in particular.

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<sup>66</sup> Gittelman, interview.

<sup>67</sup> Otis House Project Committee meeting minutes, 15 November 1999.



Under the direction of a newly hired project manager, the staff's vision quickly changed. Issues of material culture accuracy were replaced by "the subject of attracting diverse ethnic groups. The committee discussed the strong ethnic and immigrant community ties that can be found in [the house's] history and that of its surrounding community."<sup>68</sup> The reinterpretation committee also began to discuss the broad themes that they felt Otis could reflect – themes that naturally lent themselves to diachronic interpretation. These included "American themes such as mobility and aspiration," "social and ethnic diversity, "gender roles [that] relate to the themes of diversity and family life," and "appearance, involving how the house looked, its perception by occupants and visitors, and its function." It was during this conversation that one staff member "suggested that the story come from the perspective of the house itself [since] the house has a story to tell about what happened and who lived there."<sup>69</sup>

Ultimately, the reinterpretation committee developed three themes that would encompass the Otis "story line." These were *Making a House a Home*, *The Constancy of Change*, and *The Process of Preservation*. To best communicate these themes, the Otis House would be reinterpreted to reflect a broader range of its occupants through the introduction of period rooms. Plans included the creation of a new orientation space in the basement of the house, which currently houses SPNEA's archives. (The Society was, and is, in the process of developing a museum of New England history, and the archives were to be moved into that building.) The first floor would remain interpreted to the Otis period; the furniture in the parlor would be replaced with reproductions, so that visitors

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<sup>68</sup> Otis House Project Committee meeting minutes, 4 January 2000.

<sup>69</sup> Otis House Project Committee meeting minutes, 15 February 2000.





could more fully experience the space.<sup>70</sup> On the second floor, the Osborn family would be introduced in the withdrawing room, though Otis decorative finishes would remain. A middle chamber, which had been the cause of interpretive debate over the years, would be used as an exhibition space detailing the changes in the West End or Mrs. Mott's establishment. In addition, a critical correction to a past error would be made. Sally Otis's bedchamber, currently the ell chamber above the kitchen, would be moved to what was discovered to be its rightful position as the parlor chamber. The ell chamber would be reinterpreted to reflect the house's use as a boarding house during the 1840s. Interpretation would ultimately be expanded to the third floor, where a less genteel boarding house room from the end of the nineteenth century would be installed, as well as a room reflecting SPNEA's role as the longest occupant of the house, in the form of William Sumner Appleton's recreated office.

Peter Gittelman, SPNEA's Director of Interpretation and Public Programming, acknowledges that there were two phases to the reinterpretation project. The first, outlined above, was the "decision to do anything."<sup>71</sup> This decision derived from a wealth of new scholarship on the Federal period and the Otis family, the necessity for the refurbishment of an aging installation, and a perceived need to re-vamp the existing interpretation so as to maintain its position as "cutting edge" within the historic house community. Through the committee process, the reinterpretation evolved from the correction of past errors, literally, to the correction of past errors, figuratively – the chance to tell a broader story and reach a more diverse audience.

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<sup>70</sup> The rooms in the Otis House are not stanchioned, as all tours are guided.

<sup>71</sup> Gittelman, interview.





The second decision Gittelman identifies was that to “scale it back from \$3.5 million to \$350,000” in the past year.<sup>72</sup> This was motivated by practical factors. A major component of the diachronic reinterpretation was the creation of an orientation space in the basement of the Otis House, called Appleton Hall. This orientation would include an audio-visual program focusing on urban and neighborhood history, computer kiosks and displays introducing SPNEA’s mission, history and properties, and ticketing and visitor amenities. Significantly, there was no mention of an orientation to the themes that would be presented through the period rooms upstairs.<sup>73</sup> This component was deemed problematic when discussions of moving the archives began to take place. Ultimately to be part of SPNEA’s planned museum of New England history, the archives would have to be moved twice – once out of Appleton Hall, and again into the new museum when it was completed. The movement of SPNEA’s significant archival collection not once but twice gave room for pause with the Society.<sup>74</sup>

Second, while increasing visitation was not a factor in the decision to interpret rooms from different eras, it was a reason that the project was scaled back. Even after all the committee discussions, there was “no concrete plan” in place and it was decided that “to spend \$3.5 million on a project that would not bring in lots of people was foolish.”<sup>75</sup> Colleagues from Colonial Williamsburg were the first to express some hesitation at the scope of the planned reinterpretation. In Boston for an SPNEA-sponsored symposium,

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<sup>72</sup> Gittelman, interview.

<sup>73</sup> It should be noted that the Otis House’s current orientation, a slide show located in the china closet off of the kitchen, is quite comprehensive, focusing on the changing neighborhood and differing uses of the house over time.

<sup>74</sup> Gittelman, interview.

<sup>75</sup> Gittelman, interview.



architectural historians from the Virginia site spent a significant amount of time participating in discussions about the reinterpretation of the Otis House. They inquired about the potential increase in attendance, projected at around 10 percent, and questioned the project's financial feasibility."<sup>76</sup> (Ironically, the large scope of the project was in some ways determined by finances. Gittelman expressed concern that with "a program so similar to what it had been, why would funders want to pay for an aesthetic upgrade?"<sup>77</sup> It was perceived that grantmakers would respond more favorably to some of the more non-traditional elements of the reinterpretation, including period rooms reflecting lower class tenants.)

A third practical consideration that limited the reinterpretation was the loss of staff members who were key supporters of the project, notably William Tramposch, former Vice President for Museums and Collections, and the project manager. Without their "interest in breaking the rules,"<sup>78</sup> focus at the SPNEA returned to the New England museum project.

SPNEA staff describe the scaled-back reinterpretation as an "enhanced, slightly upgraded 1970s installation."<sup>79</sup> As plans stand now, the house will remain virtually the same, though elements like paint color and carpet choice will be updated to reflect the latest research. Sally Otis's bedchamber (Figure 7) will be moved to the parlor chamber, a currently uninterpreted space that had served as Abbott Lowell Cummings's office. The kitchen chamber will be installed as a boarding house room circa 1850. This plan is

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<sup>76</sup> Gittelman, interview.

<sup>77</sup> Gittelman, interview.

<sup>78</sup> Gittelman, interview.

<sup>79</sup> Gittelman, interview.



lauded within SPNEA for its sensitivity to the physical fabric of the building and for the potential it has to complete the original plan within ten to fifteen years. As funding becomes available, exhibit space focusing on Mrs. Mott and the changing neighborhood will be installed where there is space, and the third floor (currently staff offices) will be installed as a later boarding house room and William Sumner Appleton's office. Site Manager Carolyn Wahto feels that "even with the scale back, this is a solid step forward. We have not done anything we can't undo, and have not compromised the physical fabric of the building." She also hopes that the "improved" installation will bring in new audiences and will "revitalize old visitors to come back."<sup>80</sup>

In reviewing the issues associated with diachronic interpretation, it becomes clear that both the full-scale and especially the rethought interpretive plans put forth by SPNEA have flaws. Primary among them is the fact that this interpretation, like the one that preceded it in the 1970s, will be undertaken in a piecemeal fashion. Rather than reinstalling the house with a complete vision, the Otis House will be reinstalled room by room, and the tour and education programs will be constantly reworked to incorporate what new period rooms might appear. Obviously the physical issues associated with moving the archives were great, and the decision to leave them in place was responsible. However, issues of guide training, educational programming, and staff time (also significant, though not as tangible) will suffer through this gradual reinterpretation.

In addition, by proceeding on a step-by-step basis, SPNEA loses the sense of being on the cutting edge of historic house interpretation that was the impetus for these discussions in the first place. Installing one period room and correcting past mistakes

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<sup>80</sup> Wahto, interview.





does not compare with the groundbreaking work that the initial paint and wallpaper analysis comprised in the 1970s. It is clear, too, that the 1970s interpretation is now considered out of date by SPNEA staff, both aesthetically and historically. This is an excellent example of how ideas about “history making” change. If we accept as inevitable the notion that attitudes toward history and interpretation are evolving as quickly as once a generation, the question must be asked: is interpretation that is considered cutting-edge today going to be looked at the same way fifteen years from now? Even if funds are secured to install a complete diachronic interpretation, its shelf life may be extremely short by the year 2017. Worse still, a new interpretive ideal may have presented itself by that time, making obsolete the steps taken toward a diachronic installation.

The result of such a piecemeal introduction of different eras puts pressure on the guide and the visitor. At the end of a tour that is primarily about Federal-era Boston, both will be expected to make a leap forward to 1850 for one room. While a diachronic installation featuring one or two rooms from each era might present the “walk through time” concept visually, and therefore be more easily grasped by the visitor and explained by the tour guide, the reinterpretation of the Otis House asks visitors to step forward in time for a moment, and then go back again. Even the full-scale plans that have been put on hold left six rooms interpreted as Otis or Osborn spaces, with only three others interpreting different periods, supplemented by an orientation and exhibit space.

Finally, the reinstallation does compromise physical fabric, though on a smaller scale than initially proposed. While plans to provide orientation in Appleton Hall would have necessitated breaking through the granite base on which the house currently sits



(having been moved back 40 feet in 1926 to escape demolition), current plans involve covering historic wallpaper using an untested method.<sup>81</sup>

In many ways, SPNEA and the Otis House are the ideal setting for the introduction of diachronic interpretation. SPNEA has the resources and expertise to install period rooms accurately. They have the collections to furnish such rooms, and the professionals to finish them. The staff has experience with diachronic interpretation of both multi-generational properties and those that use period rooms to tell the story of the building's evolution. On this broader level, SPNEA, whose history and mission have always stressed architectural preservation rather than sites of historical importance, is well suited to interpret the Otis House from the building's point of view. By introducing diachronic interpretation, SPNEA is not really telling the stories of the various people of all classes who lived in the house. They are telling the story of the house itself, and of the physical changes to the neighborhood that surrounds it. This is the sort of situation in which diachronic interpretation might work best.

SPNEA does a disservice to itself and its visitors when it attempts to use diachronic interpretation to reach out to new audiences. The same connections between past and present that are espoused by advocates of diachronic interpretation can be made at the Otis House through the story of Harry and Sally Otis alone. Although they admittedly represent an elite fraction of Boston society, and although they lived over two hundred years ago, elements of their story resonate with both traditional and non-traditional historic house museum audiences. They were a young couple with a young family, starting in a new home and a new career. They married for love and their letters

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<sup>81</sup> This technique is detailed in Chapter Three.



are full of affection for each other and their children. They enjoyed entertaining and aspired to success. They shared the loss of a child by drowning. Sally took care of her husband's business while he was away. The house was also the home to servants and children, others whose lives could be interpreted within the context of the Otis house as it functioned as a household in 1796. These are themes that are accessible to contemporary visitors, universal stories of family, career, and ambition.

It is obvious that SPNEA has introduced diachronic interpretation into the Otis House as a way to reconcile object versus story, and it appears that these discussions reflect some institutional conflict. To install period rooms from different eras would, in many ways, fit into SPNEA's traditional conception of its properties as objects filled with objects. Some staff members see diachronic interpretation as a way of telling a broader story, though the story has been secondary to the object in the Society's institutional history. The consideration of this interpretive technique is clearly an attempt to merge both perspectives, though in the case of the Otis House, there is no clear dividing line. Advocates for diachronic interpretation came from both the story- and object-based perspective, as did those who were not receptive to the idea of installing period rooms. Perhaps diachronic interpretation will be a successful way to reconcile these disparate points of view within the Otis House, as well as within SPNEA at large. However, it is clear that the planned execution leaves many questions unresolved. It represents a midway point between diachronic interpretation and "a moment in time," and will most likely lead to visitor confusion and interpretive complications.





## CHAPTER TWO

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### THE EFFICACY OF DIACHRONIC INTERPRETATION

Historic house museums have varied motivations, both philosophical and pragmatic, for introducing diachronic interpretation. Whether such interpretation aims to share the latest scholarship, attract new audiences, or secure funding, its ultimate goal must be to help the visitor “more clearly to understand the truths of the past.”<sup>1</sup> Once installed, however, its effectiveness in reaching audiences – both old and new – is difficult to measure. The efficacy of diachronic interpretation is often determined by practical factors, like the tour guide’s interaction with the visitor, rather than by the accuracy or innovation of the installation itself.

#### *The Historic House Museum Audience*

The first element in evaluating the usefulness of period rooms as an interpretive tool is developing an understanding of the historic house museum audience. Museum professionals often have preconceptions of their audiences’ needs and wants that do not match reality. Visitors may be stereotyped, and “staff people, without ever intending to do so, can form, encourage, and perpetuate among themselves images of the audience that misrepresent the visitors.”<sup>2</sup> Attitudes toward visitors can vary from professional to professional, often depending on the agenda of the historic house museum. Susan Schreiber, Vice President for Public Programs at the Historical Society of Washington,

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<sup>1</sup> William T. Alderson and Shirley Payne Low, *Interpretation of Historic Sites*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ross J. Loomis, *Museum Visitor Evaluation: A New Tool for Management* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1986), 66.





D.C., described Hampton, a National Park Service site in Maryland that uses diachronic interpretation, as “a jarring experience” for the visitor because the period rooms are not linked by a common theme or family story. She feels strongly that “experiences where people have to work so hard are not successful.”<sup>3</sup> Peter Gittelman of SPNEA, on the other hand, thinks that “visitors are sophisticated enough” to make connections across periods. It is obviously in his interest to espouse this idea, since SPNEA’s properties often take a “walk through time” interpretive approach.

Some historic house museums perform visitor evaluations in order to better identify their audience and anticipate their needs, for “it is one thing in a staff meeting to discuss what visitors are like; it is quite another to undertake a survey that will determine empirically the kinds of people who are visiting the museum.”<sup>4</sup> Barbara Silberman, Director of the Pew Charitable Trust-funded Heritage Investment Program (HIP), believes that unless sites conduct visitor surveys, they will not be able to attract new audiences through new interpretation. To that end, the HIP is about to begin a three-year study in conjunction with the American Association of State and Local History focused on visitor evaluations.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the supposed objective qualities of the evaluation process, however, the conclusions drawn can in reality be quite subjective. Take, for example, the visitor survey undertaken by SPNEA for the Otis House in 1994. (Appendix A) In addition to gathering basic demographic information, the survey asked visitors to comment on the tour they had just received and to rate their interest in seeing a variety of rooms restored and added

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Schreiber, interview by author, Washington, D.C., 25 January 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Loomis, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Silberman, interview by author, Philadelphia, Pa., 11 March 2002.



to the tour. The overwhelming response by visitors was to see the kitchen restored (71%), followed by a child's room (50%) or servant's room (49%), both on the currently uninterpreted third floor of the house. Thirty-two percent of visitors responded that they would be interested in seeing "a room from the late 1880s" installed in the house.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the obvious visitor preference revealed in this survey, the reinterpretation of the Otis House will maintain the kitchen in its unrestored state and will not install a child's or servant's room, leaving the Federal-era spaces interpreted as primarily public rooms for entertaining. Instead, period rooms from the mid- and late-nineteenth century will be installed.

Visitors do not always know best, and SPNEA has legitimate reasons for leaving the Otis House kitchen in an unrestored state, despite its visitors' desires. From a preservation standpoint, this is the most responsible way to protect the original fabric that survives in the kitchen, including masonry work and original wallpaper fragments. It is also an excellent opportunity to interpret the process of preservation and restoration, which are thematically appropriate given SPNEA's mission as a preservation organization. These concepts might not appeal to visitors on a survey form, but they raise interesting questions and didactic opportunities for museum professionals.

However, what this survey makes clear is that visitors expressed a preference for learning about the uninterpreted aspects of the Otis's family life – children and servants – rather than for introducing new and largely unrelated stories into the tour. SPNEA's decision to interpret the building's history rather than the family's history in many ways flies in the face of the data put forth in this visitor survey.

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<sup>6</sup> Otis House Visitor Survey, 1993-1994.



SPNEA is ahead of many historic sites by attempting to gather visitor input on questions from amenities to interpretation. Almost no other historic site surveyed for this thesis undertook an official visitor evaluation in preparation for reinterpretation. For example, the prospect of evaluating diachronic interpretation's pedagogical or marketing potential was not considered by Hope Lodge, a historic house museum in Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, that interprets both the colonial and colonial revival periods. The site conducted visitor surveys only *after* the installation of the diachronic interpretation was complete and then "received mixed reviews on very opposite ends of the spectrum."<sup>7</sup> At Cliveden, a National Trust for Historic Preservation site in Philadelphia, the staff "worried [the reinterpretation undertaken in the early 1990s] was too confusing or not what visitors were coming to see," but Elizabeth Laurent, the former curator, did not recall that any visitor surveys were done as part of the project.<sup>8</sup> Decatur House conducted an unofficial visitor survey (Appendix B) through a graduate student at George Washington University, but the National Trust did not formally evaluate visitor desires in their current reinterpretation of the site. The visitor survey, which questioned only twelve visitors (as opposed to the Otis House's sample of 271), is cited by Decatur House staff as an influence on their programming.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, even when visitor evaluations are undertaken, they measure the opinions of those visitors who *already have sought out the historic house museum experience*. Surveying the new audiences that house museums might wish to attract can be a difficult, even impossible, task. Evaluating community response is one way to attempt to ascertain

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<sup>7</sup> Patricia Mousley, interview by author, Philadelphia, Pa., 30 January 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Laurent, interview by author, Philadelphia, Pa., 25 October 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Sheri Levinsky, phone interview by author, 28 February 2002.





an interpretation's potential to new audiences, which Cliveden attempted with neighborhood focus groups as part of that site's reinterpretation.<sup>10</sup>

What is known for certain, then, about the historic house museum audience? The visitor evaluation done at the Otis House revealed that the majority of visitors were white (97%), female (65%) and between thirty-five and fifty-four years of age (47%). Almost half of these visitors (48%) had graduate level education, while another 40% were college graduates.<sup>11</sup> These statistics, while perhaps not relevant for the new breed of historic sites like the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, are almost certainly consistent for traditional historic house museums. They illustrate the narrow range of audience that diachronic interpretation will reach: an audience that shares experience and education quite similar to that of museum professionals themselves.

Generally, there are three types of historic house museum visitor: the nostalgia-seeker, the entertainment-seeker, and the continuity-seeker. It can be argued that all three might be attracted by elements of diachronic interpretation. The nostalgia-seeker is the visitor that sees the past as a romantic, simpler time exemplary of higher morals and purer motivations. The earliest historic house museum visitor was the nostalgia-seeker, responding to societal change brought about by industry and immigration. Scholars have pointed out that today "once again we are at the end of a century which has seen great prosperity and material growth, but also dislocation from changes within society."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, there is still a portion of the historic house museum audience that seeks to

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<sup>10</sup> Laurent, interview.

<sup>11</sup> Otis House visitor survey, 1993-1994.

<sup>12</sup> Jeff Groff, "To Thine Own Self Be True: The Small Historic House Museum in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" (paper presented at the Athenaeum of Philadelphia Symposium, Philadelphia, Pa., December 1998), 1.



“temporarily escape the pressures and complexities of modern life in the restored environments that seem to represent a simpler, slower, and more peaceful way of life.”<sup>13</sup> Diachronic interpretation can be effective for this group of visitors because it presents simple snapshots of past eras that do not require the visitor to find connections between periods or put them in a broader context. Though such a one-dimensional response is not what museum professionals are seeking through the use of diachronic interpretation, there is no doubt that some visitors respond to installations of period rooms on this level.

Visitors who are entertainment-seekers may value diachronic interpretation for much the same reason. A series of period rooms imitates, in many ways, entertainment options popular in contemporary America: television, film, and the Internet. Rooms that work as a series of vignettes, a snapshot of history, hold the interest of audiences who have been trained to view entertainment in this way. In a society where museums find themselves trapped between the competing interests of education and entertainment, diachronic interpretation can be seen as an effective compromise.

Finally, and more positively, visitors who are continuity-seekers can relate to diachronic interpretation on the deeper level that museum professionals advocate. These visitors “appear to be searching for their cultural roots and for a sense of belonging. They want to experience the sense of continuity that the site can help provide as a tangible link with the past.”<sup>14</sup> With diachronic interpretation, this link is clearly

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<sup>13</sup> Michael J. Ettema, “History Museums and the Culture of Materialism,” in *Past Meets Present: Essays about Historic Interpretation and Public Audiences* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 74.

<sup>14</sup> Alderson and Low, 24.



established through time – especially when the site interprets late nineteenth or early twentieth century culture.

After identifying their audience, historic house museums must ask themselves a second question: “are we looking for a different audience, or does the same audience need to understand better?”<sup>15</sup> The demographics cited above suggest that the current audience served by historic house museums can work their mind around the “intellectual acrobatics”<sup>16</sup> that diachronic interpretation requires. But for over half (54%) of historic property museums, these visitors represent fewer than 5,000 people a year.<sup>17</sup> Recent research, most notably Rosenzweig and Thelen’s *The Presence of the Past*, indicates that there is a new audience to be tapped by traditional historic house museums.<sup>18</sup> Does diachronic interpretation really reach this new audience as its advocates believe?

Rosenzweig and Thelen’s study revealed the ways in which Americans from all classes and ethnicities “make the past part of their everyday routines and turn to it as a way of grappling with profound questions about how to live.”<sup>19</sup> Over half (57%) of the respondents to Rosenzweig and Thelen’s survey had visited history museums and historic sites within the past year (though it should be noted that 72% of those had at least a college degree).<sup>20</sup> More importantly, history museums were rated as the most trustworthy

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<sup>15</sup> Max van Balgooy, interview by author, Washington, D.C., 25 January 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Mousley, interview.

<sup>17</sup> Gerald George, “Historic Property Museums: What Are They Preserving?” *Preservation Forum* 2, No. 3 (Summer 1989): 2.

<sup>18</sup> This is, of course, assuming that the physical structure of the historic house museum can accommodate more visitors.

<sup>19</sup> Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 18.

<sup>20</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen, 234, 241.





source of information about the past, ahead of oral history from relatives, eyewitness accounts, and high school and college educators.

Respondents appreciated the “sense of immediacy – of personal participation” available at historic sites.<sup>21</sup> They also “said they sought out museums that presented artifacts or themes from their own lives.”<sup>22</sup> Both responses have direct connections to the practice of using diachronic interpretation. In the first case, diachronic interpretation arguably requires the visitor to be actively engaged with the interpretation as they move through time, constantly shifting historical context to analyze and evaluate what is presented in the period rooms presented. (Whether or not this is actually achieved is another story. At Decatur House, for example, a visitor survey was done in anticipation of the de-installation of a diachronic interpretive plan. Decatur House has been interpreted since the 1960s to two different periods: the early nineteenth century tenure of Stephen Decatur and early Secretaries of State on the first floor, and the early twentieth century world of Marie Beale, the Washington society matron who preserved the house, on the second floor. Sheri Levinsky, Director of Education and Programs, notes that visitors leaving the tour responded to the survey that they had understood the diachronic aspects of the tour as “the Decatur lived on the first floor and the Beales lived on the second floor.”<sup>23</sup>)

In addition, since visitors report that they visit history museums that reflect interests directly connected with their personal experiences, diachronic interpretation has

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<sup>21</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen, 105.

<sup>22</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen, 107.

<sup>23</sup> Levinsky, interview. The removal of diachronic elements from Decatur House’s interpretation is fully discussed in the case study at the end of Chapter Three.





the potential to attract an audience from outside the traditional historic house museum realm. Just as visitors to the earliest historic house museums had an immediate connection to the history they were viewing, today's visitors can experience that same direct, personal connection with stories and objects from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Theoretically, then, diachronic interpretation holds an appeal for all three types of traditional historic house museum visitors, and also holds the potential for historic house museums to reach an audience that has not previously been served. But simply because such interpretation attracts visitors does not mean it reaches them intellectually, whatever the hopes museum professionals or funders. While “the visitor’s chief interest is in whatever touches his personality, his experience and his ideals,”<sup>24</sup> interpretation has the responsibility of taking the visitor beyond this interest. Measuring the didactic merits of diachronic interpretation – measuring whether the historic house museum’s vision, themes and context are reaching their visitors – is a difficult prospect.

### ***Post-Reinterpretation Challenges***

Once historic house museums have determined that their visitors and site will benefit from the introduction of diachronic interpretation, there are institutional challenges that can affect the efficacy of the reinterpretation. These difficulties fall into two categories: the “personality-oriented”<sup>25</sup> nature of such projects, and the reluctance of guides to let go of their original training.

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<sup>24</sup> Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 11.

<sup>25</sup> Laurent, interview.



In the former case, many museum professionals are quick to point out that trends in museum interpretation are personality-driven. Karie Diethorn, Chief Curator at Independence National Historical Park, notes that oftentimes a “dynamic director” comes in and changes the historic house museum’s program, serving as “the impetus for change.”<sup>26</sup> This observation certainly rings true for the sites studied for this thesis. The Otis House reinterpretation came about after the hiring of a new Vice President who had just had considerable success at another museum and “was interested in breaking the rules” of historic house museum interpretation.<sup>27</sup> Cliveden, which was reinterpreted in the early 1990s by the then-curator after a lengthy National Endowment for the Humanities self-study process, is now about to be reinterpreted by the new staff, who hope to introduce the period room concept. At Hope Lodge, the continuity of one key staff member has ensured the survival of the former director’s diachronic vision of the site.

In all likelihood, this phenomenon is not one that can be easily remedied. It is human nature to want to leave a personal imprint on a site, to believe that one is more innovative, scholarly, or passionate than any other director before or since. Ideally, the continued professionalization of the historic house museum field will open up a dialogue amongst professionals about the danger of such attitudes. Ironically, however, it may be this very professionalization that leads staff to act in this manner. Historic house museum professionals must be self-aware and honest about the reasons that have led to their decision to reinterpret.

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<sup>26</sup> Karie Diethorn, interview by author, Philadelphia, Pa., 31 October 2001.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Gittelman, phone interview by author, 31 October 2001.



A second, and perhaps more easily controlled, challenge to the efficacy of diachronic interpretation is the difficulty many guides have with altering their tour or, more broadly, their vision of the site. The visitor's experience at an historic house museum is filtered through the lens of their tour guide. Improved scholarship and increased accuracy are irrelevant if the tour guide cannot, or chooses not to, communicate the reinterpreted message to the audience.

Diachronic interpretation requires guides who are insightful and able to assist the visitors in making connections through time. These tours fail when interpreters simply identify furniture or recite lists of names. At Cliveden, a multi-generational site that currently interprets one generation and how it looked back to recreate an earlier generation's legacy, a "high skill level is needed from the guides."<sup>28</sup> In this case, former Curator Elizabeth Laurent notes, it is not enough for the guides to know the information, but important that they take a step back to acknowledge the relevance of interpreting the Chew family's reflections on their ancestors. Diachronic interpretation demands a sophisticated tour guide (and, many would argue, a compensated tour guide); the lack of an interpreter who can lead their visitors on a walk through time is a major failure in the efficacy of diachronic interpretation.

Reinterpretation is in many ways a political decision for the historic house museum, representing a movement away from how the site has traditionally been run. Guides at historic house museums have an extremely strong connection to their sites, perhaps because it is a *house* as well as a museum that they are interpreting. Many guides are not professionals and may have a more visceral, less studied, reaction to

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<sup>28</sup> Laurent, interview.





reinterpretation. It is not unusual for sites to lose volunteers over the course of implementing a reinterpreted plan.<sup>29</sup>

Professionals advocate involving guides and staff in the process at every phase of the reinterpretation to ensure institutional support at all levels. Susan Schreiber says it is essential to “build consensus” among guides and staff in order to create a viable and effective reinterpretation.<sup>30</sup> At Decatur House, the guides are updated via e-mail almost daily as construction crews and researchers uncover additional details of Latrobe’s original design for the house, while at Hope Lodge, guides were recruited to assist with the actual installation of the new interpretation. Volunteers helped repaint the rooms interpreted to the Colonial period in their appropriate colors. This work literally provided a personal connection to the reinterpreted house museum. The project received a citation from the American Association of State and Local History.<sup>31</sup>

Even when guides are included in discussions about reinterpretation from the beginning, they often find it difficult to move beyond their original training. Some historic house museum professionals argue that “even if guides cannot process it, providing them with new information raises the bar” of the experience will visitors have at a historic site.<sup>32</sup> With diachronic interpretation especially, it may be that the choice of guides is the single most important element for success. All historic house museum visitors can potentially respond to such interpretation, but their ability to process and

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<sup>29</sup> A tour guide at the Decatur House informed a tour, during a discussion of the changes that are being made to the house, that many of the older guides had reacted quite strongly to the reinterpretation of the site and had recently left their positions.

<sup>30</sup> Schreiber, interview.

<sup>31</sup> Mousley, interview.

<sup>32</sup> Laurent, interview.



contextualize information can be hindered by the lack of a well-trained and insightful guide to help them make connections across time periods. Sites without such a resource, including the Morris-Jumel Mansion, which does not even provide its visitors with guided tours, present a one-dimensional view of history that does not insist the visitor think beyond the room setting themselves.

### *Elements of Successful Diachronic Interpretations*

In addition to well-trained guides who are committed to the site's diachronic interpretation, there are several other elements that can contribute to the success of such an interpretation. These factors – including a comprehensive orientation, clear transition points, and a tightly focused thematic tour – all address the issue of visitor comprehension of the connection between different time periods represented within the historic house museum.

To begin as the visitors do, with orientation, it is essential that the audience know from the start “exactly what they are going to see.”<sup>33</sup> Before the visitor even steps foot in the historic house museum, they must be aware that what they are about to experience is not one moment in time, but rather the story of a building's evolution through several families and uses. The orientation exhibit at Hope Lodge, which takes place in a service wing of the house, uses color-coded panels to help the visitor identify five key periods in the history of the house. The exhibit clearly shows visitors that they will see the first and last of those periods when they move inside the house, and this helps them to visualize

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<sup>33</sup> Mousley, interview.



the years between the Colonial and Colonial Revival periods before they even begin their tour.<sup>34</sup>

Orientation is also an important opportunity to introduce the themes that will tie a diachronic interpretation together. Diachronic interpretation, particularly in sites that choose to install period rooms, has the potential to overwhelm the visitor. Karie Diethorn asserts that the concept of diachrony is “understood better in books” and that historic house museum visitors can lose their bearings during a multi-era interpretation because of the varied stimuli. Without an orientation, visitors might “fail to see ...the overarching theme”<sup>35</sup> of the site.

Having an overarching theme is, of course, another critical element of successful diachronic interpretation. During training, guides are often told that, though they have a wealth of information about the site and the people who lived there, sharing all that knowledge with the visitor would be confusing and inappropriate. In many ways, diachronic interpretation should be given the same caveat. It would be irresponsible for a site to interpret everything they know about its history, which both confuses and bores the visitor. Rather, sites should “avoid confusing visitors with unfiltered information” by choosing the stories that their resources, collection and staff can tell better than any other site.<sup>36</sup>

At Cliveden, the NEH self-study provided the opportunity for staff to identify the

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<sup>34</sup> Color-coding successive generations of occupants is also done in the Smithsonian Institution’s exhibit *Within These Walls*, which interprets five different periods of a Ipswich, Massachusetts, house. The technique is quite effective in that it allows visitors to clearly compartmentalize information from different eras without confusion, while simultaneously allowing connections to be made.

<sup>35</sup> Diethorn, interview.

<sup>36</sup> Laurent, interview.





“best” stories out of the “many great stories” at the site. Cliveden used the self-study to determine what they wanted visitors to remember after leaving their site, what they could do better than any of the more than 300 sites in the Philadelphia area. Ultimately, staff decided that Cliveden's primary story was that of the Chew family, especially in the period around the Centennial of 1876, and how they collected and displayed significant objects as a shrine to their own family. This multi-layered interpretation was enhanced by the fact that later generations, up until the 1950s, used the house and looked back at their ancestors in similar ways. The Chew family itself is the link that ties the multi-generational interpretation together.

In the case of historic house museums that use period rooms from unrelated owners, a link is sometimes more difficult to find. At the Otis House, three themes were identified to take the visitor on a journey from 1796 until 1916. These were *The Constancy of Change*, *Making a House a Home*, and *The Process of Preservation*. SPNEA felt that these three themes represented the story that the Otis House could tell best; that is, the story of an evolving urban landscape, the changing conception of home, and the preservation of the building through the pioneering work of the Society. Individually, these themes have the potential to tie the period room experience together for the visitor. An attempt to utilize more than one theme on a single tour could be overwhelming.<sup>37</sup> Hope Lodge links its two periods through an aesthetic comparison. Its installation clearly sets up a dialogue between each Colonial room and its Colonial Revival counterpart. This visual link helps the visitor comprehend the Degn family's

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<sup>37</sup> At Decatur House, the new interpretation will be supplemented by three themed tours dealing with architecture, slavery, and entertaining. The three will be offered at different times on the same day so that visitors who are interested in more than one topic can join more than one tour.





conception of Colonial life in the early twentieth century, in much the same way that Cliveden attempts to illustrate how later generations conceived the past.<sup>38</sup>

While developing an overarching theme is invaluable for a period room installation, it also points out one of the main problems with diachronic interpretation. The visitor loses any sort of context beyond the thread that links the tour. Each room is illustrative of a different step on a walk through time of the history of Boston's West End, for example, or the changing aesthetics of upper class Philadelphians. But the rooms are not placed in the larger context of how the entire household ran or what political and social factors impacted the larger world at each point in history. Visitors can easily become confused, believing that the house may have actually appeared in this evolved state at some point in its history. They also may stop working or learning because their tour has simply become too confusing.

Max van Balgooy of the National Trust identifies clear transition points as necessary for helping the audience understand the diachronic experience. He suggests that these installations use features such as the threshold of a door or garden gate to signal that the visitor will be moving to another moment in time.<sup>39</sup> This can help visitors to compare the different periods presented to them, and helps to prevent visitor confusion as to the jumps in time that they must make. It remains clear, however, that there are significant challenges to diachronic interpretation, on both the institutional and visitor level.

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<sup>38</sup> The diachronic interpretation of Hope Lodge will be considered in-depth at the end of this chapter.

<sup>39</sup> van Balgooy, interview.



Susan Schreiber notes that “telling the broadest story is very important. Sites must choose a method and do the best job they can.”<sup>40</sup> For many sites, the chosen method is becoming diachronic interpretation. For historic house museums that adopt this manner of interpretation, it is essential to consider audience needs and wants, staff and guide involvement, and the story that can be best told with diachronic interpretation. But it is also essential to consider other methods of expressing the site’s “multiple realities”<sup>41</sup> beyond the installation of period rooms. The one thing that a historic house museum can do better than any other type of museum is to show the visitor how a household ran together as a system.<sup>42</sup> Historic sites that choose to install diachronic interpretation must ask themselves what they are giving up in order to interpret the house’s entire history.

### ***Case Study: Hope Lodge, Fort Washington, Pennsylvania***

Hope Lodge (Figure 8) is a Middle Georgian house located just outside Philadelphia in Fort Washington, Pennsylvania. Administered jointly by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC) and the Friends of Hope Lodge, the house was reinterpreted in the late 1980s to represent two periods of history: the Colonial period of Quaker Samuel Morris and the Colonial Revival occupancy of William and Alice Degn, who lived in the house from 1922 until 1953. Hope Lodge is an excellent example of a well-executed installation of period room diachronic interpretation. The interpretation was set up to provide clear points of comparison for the

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<sup>40</sup> Schreiber, interview.

<sup>41</sup> Philip Seitz, tour of Cliveden, 28 February 2002.

<sup>42</sup> Laurent, interview.



visitor. The staff and volunteers were included in the reinterpretation from the start, and the physical installation was both respectful of historic fabric and ensured that the interpretation was maintained even through key staff changes.

Hope Lodge was home to several different families, each of whom used the house in a slightly different way, throughout its history. Samuel Morris had the house built between 1743 and 1748. There is some evidence to suggest that Edmund Wooley, designer of Independence Hall, consulted with Morris about the design of Hope Lodge. Between 1743 and 1746, Wooley “appeared to be making brief, regular trips to Samuel Morris’s mill” leading researchers to speculate “that Wooley may have been providing Morris with professional advice in exchange for grain and lime.”<sup>43</sup> Morris was a bachelor and lived alone in the house, which was his primary residence.

In 1776, William West, an Irish-born merchant, purchased the house from Morris’s estate as a family haven from the fighting expected in Philadelphia. During the following year’s encampment by the Continental Army, George Washington’s surgeon general “made the house his medical headquarters. It is unknown whether the Wests remained in residence” at that time.<sup>44</sup> Financier Henry Hope bought the house for his ward, James Horatio Watmough, and Watmough’s new bride, in 1784. The Watmoughs likely “resided at Hope Lodge on a seasonal basis; from 1784, they consigned the care and cultivation of their farmland to tenants.”<sup>45</sup> The Watmough family lived in the house

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<sup>43</sup> Treese, Lorett, *Hope Lodge and Mather Mill: A Pennsylvania Trail of History Guide* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2001), 21.

<sup>44</sup> Treese, 24.

<sup>45</sup> Treese, 26.





until 1832, when Jacob Wentz, a tenant farmer, purchased it from them; then, for “almost a century it was in the hands of the Wentz family, who used it as a farmhouse.”<sup>46</sup>

The late nineteenth century saw changes to the area surrounding Hope Lodge, with commuter railroads turning nearby Chestnut Hill into an exclusive suburb. At this time, “antiquarians began to discover the treasures that time had left behind in such areas” and in 1912 historians Horace Mather Lippincott and Harold Donaldson Eberlein “rediscovered” Hope Lodge. Their book *The Colonial Homes of Philadelphia and Its Neighbourhood* identifies the house as “second to none in the neighbourhood of Philadelphia either in its broad dignity or in the purity of its Georgian architecture.”<sup>47</sup> In 1922, as part of the Colonial Revival fervor, Philadelphia businessman William Degn and his wife purchased the house. The couple “electrified Hope Lodge and added bathrooms on the first and second floors;”<sup>48</sup> elsewhere in the house, they attempted to restore the house to the way it looked when it was first built. The Degns, who used Hope Lodge as their primary residence, filled the house with both antiques and Colonial Revival reproduction furniture. Upon Alice Degn’s death, the Hope Lodge Foundation was created to open “a museum and permanent exhibit typical of the architecture and furnishings of the Colonial period of America.”<sup>49</sup>

Over a period of two hundred years, Hope Lodge served a variety of purposes for a variety of owners: residence of a Quaker bachelor, wartime hospital, seasonal retreat, farmhouse, and Colonial Revival showplace. Until the late 1980s, the house was

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<sup>46</sup> James D. Van Trump, “History in Houses: Hope Lodge, Whitmarsh, Pennsylvania,” *Antiques* 89 (April 1966): 543

<sup>47</sup> As quoted in Treese, 10.

<sup>48</sup> Treese, 12.

<sup>49</sup> As quoted in Treese, 15.



interpreted by the PHMC as a series of period rooms representing the five different families who lived in the house over time. Then Curator Brenda Reigle reconsidered the “time travel” interpretation of the house. The reconsideration came about for a variety of reasons. One was a self-study of the house funded by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The self-study looked at a number of aspects of site operations, including interpretation, advising that the mission statement and interpretation be reconfigured so as to better reflect each other.<sup>50</sup> Another impetus was research that had been done for the Historic Structures Report and by a private consultant, revealing that some of the interpreted families never really lived at Hope Lodge, using it as a secondary residence, or renting it to tenants.<sup>51</sup>

Reigle determined that the site was “not telling an accurate story.”<sup>52</sup> She reviewed the resources available at the site, including the building, landscape, and collections, and found that they all supported the mid-eighteenth century and twentieth century time periods. The architecture remained largely the same as when Morris built the house, and collections available through the PHMC could be used to interpret rooms based on Morris’s 1770 inventory. The landscape and outbuildings reflected the Degn period, and there were extensive collections as well as documentation of the interiors from that time, including 1930s photographs from the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS).

The PHMC and Friends organization met to discuss a change in mission and

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<sup>50</sup> Barbara Silberman of the Heritage Investment Program asserts that if sites have missions that are clear and make sense, they “will get the funding to do what they want to do.”

<sup>51</sup> Brenda Reigle, phone interview by author, 14 March 2002.

<sup>52</sup> Reigle, interview.



interpretation. Because so many of the owners had a transient relationship with the site, and because the Colonial Revival “is not interpreted very much even though it is a significant period,” it was decided to reinstall the rooms to “tell the Colonial Revival story.”<sup>53</sup> Reigle notes that there was a link between the two time periods, because the Degns felt that they were preserving the memory of Colonial America; that link was heightened through the tangible presence of the house as a connection between Morris and the Degns.<sup>54</sup>

The site had uncovered a story it that wanted to tell, and one that it felt it could tell better than other historic house museums in the area. In addition, it had the resources to tell its chosen story well. The next step in the process was to involve the Board and volunteers. Patricia Mousley admits that “some were not happy, and there was some loss.”<sup>55</sup> Remaining staff and volunteers were engaged in the multi-year process of reinterpretation through “a lot of internal preparation work” including interpreter training, a new interpretive manual, and regular updates to members through the Friends newsletter. One of the most innovative ways in which Hope Lodge connected with its volunteers was by having them assist with the reinstallation process, repainting rooms based on paint analysis. The project, which received a citation from the American Association of State and Local History (AASLH), allowed a professional architect and a paint analyst to advise and train local volunteers. Reigle recalls it as a “super project”

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<sup>53</sup> Mousley, interview.

<sup>54</sup> Reigle, interview.

<sup>55</sup> Mousley, interview.





because the “painters had a vested interest in making the paint look great, and it created a camaraderie amongst the volunteers.”<sup>56</sup>

Aside from the new paint and floor finishes, there was little physical work that needed to be done to the building in its transformation from five periods to two.

Approximately one foot of molding in the hallway, incorrectly repaired by the Degns, was replaced using new fabric replicated from a Morris sample. Narrow tongue and groove flooring in the kitchen wing was replaced with wider boards to create “a more consistent eighteenth-century appearance.”<sup>57</sup> (The kitchen wing is not Samuel Morris’s kitchen, which no longer stands, and is filled with reproduction furniture and used as a program space more than as a period room.) The second floor Degn bathroom was retained, though not interpreted, and Reigle documented the wiring in the basement, though there was no funds available to recreate eighteenth century lighting levels.<sup>58</sup>

As reinterpreted, Hope Lodge allows visitors to compare between the aesthetic modes of the mid-eighteenth century and the mid- twentieth. Almost every period room installed in the Colonial style has a corresponding room installed in the Colonial Revival style. The comparison is most vivid in the front parlors, which are located opposite one another. Visitors can stand in the “Morris” parlor – with vibrant Prussian blue woodwork, unvarnished floorboards, and undressed windows – and look across the main hall to the “Degn” parlor, whose woodwork is painted white (with hardware picked out in black), floors are varnished and carpeted, and windows are covered in ruffled white curtains. (Figures 9 and 10) Other rooms that are set up for comparison are the

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<sup>56</sup> Reigle, interview.

<sup>57</sup> Reigle, interview.

<sup>58</sup> Reigle, interview.





downstairs parlor (Colonial) versus the upstairs parlor (Colonial Revival) and the guest bedroom (Colonial Revival) versus the master bedroom (Colonial).

The stories of the other inhabitants have not been left out of the reinterpretation. During the orientation program, all five of the periods originally interpreted are discussed with the help of a color-coded panel. In addition, a room on the second floor of the house was outfitted, again with the help of volunteers, as an exhibit space. Panels have been placed in window openings to create a gallery setting, and yearly exhibits address issues across the generations of owners. Reigle notes that “the exhibit space was always meant to talk about the other families no longer interpreted, and as a way to draw people back to the site for changing exhibits.”<sup>59</sup>

Despite the fact that visitor surveys were not done until after the reinterpretation was complete, and that those responses yielded “mixed reviews,” Mousley believes that the audience, and especially school groups, responds well to the diachronic interpretation of two periods. She notes that “visitors don’t leave with as confused a look,” especially because the orientation program is strong and “tells them right up front exactly what they are going to see.” Mousley also underscores the importance of education to the mission of the Friends of Hope Lodge, who run the site in conjunction with the PHMC. She believes that the new diachronic interpretation educates visitors about preservation and that the children “really respond” to elements of the Colonial Revival installations that seem historic to them in a way they may not to adult visitors.<sup>60</sup> Reigle cautions, however, that “some visitors still do not get it” and stresses the importance of interpretive staff

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<sup>59</sup> Reigle, interview.

<sup>60</sup> Mousely, interview.



training. She cited special event days when interpreters are stationed throughout the house as a particular challenge, because visitors “lose something.”<sup>61</sup>

On balance, the dual-period interpretation at Hope Lodge can be considered successful for a number of reasons. It is very clear in the comparisons it makes, having thoughtfully chosen the aspects of its story it can execute well and those that make it stand out from area sites. In the Philadelphia region, which has an extraordinary number of historic house museums, such a feat is of enormous importance. Diachronic interpretation “makes Hope Lodge different than many, many others in the myriad of sites in Philadelphia.”<sup>62</sup> In addition, the Colonial Revival story is well chosen. It will have relevance in decades to come because it so closely parallels the contemporary experience of history, and it also has a direct connection for much of the historic house museum audience. The twentieth-century rooms especially stir “personal identification and a sense of memory for a number of elderly visitors.”<sup>63</sup>

Hope Lodge does not purport to tell much of the new social history, though servant and kitchen spaces are interpreted. Instead, the focus of the tour is fundamentally about aesthetics, and about the broader idea of how and why people use the past. The visitor does not get a true sense of how either the Morris or the Degn household ran, but they do get a sense of what was important to both Samuel Morris and William and Alice Degn, and how the latter tried to preserve and protect the former. Hope Lodge has found “what it can do best,” in the words of Elizabeth Laurent, and created its niche within the

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<sup>61</sup> Reigle, interview.

<sup>62</sup> Reigle, interview.

<sup>63</sup> Reigle, interview



region's historic resources. However, it cannot be denied that the site is still unsure if the interpretation and mission are reaching their visitors.





## CHAPTER THREE

### THE PHYSICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF DIACHRONIC INTERPRETATION

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In addition to transforming the didactic program of a traditional historic house museum, diachronic interpretations affect the physical fabric of the building itself. The physical ramifications of diachronic interpretation can be argued to be both positive and negative: while the technique celebrates the full evolution of the building, it also necessitates a reconsideration of earlier “restorative” work. Arguments on both sides reflect the sometimes divergent interests of the historic preservation and museum communities, but this tension is not new. In many ways, these differing opinions and their outcomes are extensions of architectural theories set forth by Eugene-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc and John Ruskin in late nineteenth century.

#### *Restoration versus Preservation*

Two paradigms of restoration were established at the end of the nineteenth century, the same era in which historic house museums became popular. French theorist Eugene-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879) advocated the restoration of buildings to their appearance at one moment in time. Alternatively, John Ruskin (1819-1900) believed that the inevitable decay and alteration that a building experiences over its lifetime should be celebrated and left unrestored.

Viollet-le-Duc thought that “to restore a building is not to preserve it, to repair, or rebuild it; it is to reinstate it in a condition of completeness which could never have



existed at any given time.”<sup>1</sup> He encouraged the removal of later additions and their replacement with “studied copies”<sup>2</sup> in order to follow “the general principle that every building and every part of a building should be restored in its own style, not only as regards appearance but structure.”<sup>3</sup> The restoration principles put forth by Viollet-le-Duc can be compared to those historic house museums that have made an attempt to restore their building to a particular moment in history, either on the exterior or, for the purposes of this discussion, through interior installations.

Ruskin felt, with regard to restoration, that “the thing is a Lie from beginning to end.”<sup>4</sup> He argued that the beauty of the object was found in its accumulations over time, saying “in architecture, the superinduced and accidental beauty is most commonly inconsistent with the preservation of original character, and the picturesque is therefore sought in ruin, and supposed to consist in decay.”<sup>5</sup> As opposed to Viollet-le-Duc, Ruskin believed that restoration:

means the most total destruction which a building can suffer: the destruction out of which no remnants can be gathered; a destruction accompanied with false description of the thing destroyed. Do not let us deceive ourselves in this important matter; it is *impossible*, as impossible as to raise the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture.<sup>6</sup>

This philosophy can be equated with historic house museums that, like the Spencer-Peirce-Little Farm in Newbury, Massachusetts, retain additions made over time. It can

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<sup>1</sup> E. Viollet-le-Duc, *On Restoration* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low, and Searle, 1875), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., *Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States before Williamsburg* (New York: Putnam, 1965), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Viollet-le-Duc, 35.

<sup>4</sup> John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 185.

<sup>5</sup> Ruskin, 183.

<sup>6</sup> Ruskin, 184.



also be seen to parallel multi-generational diachronic interpretation, such as that at Wyck, a historic house museum in Philadelphia, in which layers of a family's history and possessions are allowed to remain as accumulated.

Where, then, does period-room diachronic interpretation fit? At first glance it may seem analogous to Ruskin's philosophy. By interpreting the evolution of the house, the museum is exposing the visitor to the complex beauty of change over time. However, the installation of period rooms in many ways echoes Viollet-le-Duc's attitude, in that each room recreates a specific moment in time. In evaluating the impact of diachronic interpretation on the physical fabric of historic house museums, it is essential to acknowledge that such installations are examples neither of preservation nor of restoration. They fall into a gray area, in which the natural evolution of the building is consciously embellished for the audience.

In fact, historic house museums often fall into this gray area. Historic sites are positioned awkwardly between the sometimes competing interests of the museum world and historic preservation. This tension derives from the fact that the historic house is a collection object, a gathering space for pedagogical encounters, a marketing tool, and a historic building with its own special needs. While contemporary preservationists lean more to the side of Ruskin (that is, toward stabilization) than they do to the side of Viollet-le-Duc, the opposite argument might be made for museum professionals. Frank E. Sanchis, the former Vice-President for Stewardship of Historic Sites at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, asserts that today "historic preservation is not





synonymous with House Museums” because of the rapid expansion of the historic preservation profession in the past fifty years.<sup>7</sup> He notes that:

the culture of House Museums has evolved from one that was rooted in preservation to one which is rooted in museums administration. This can be seen when one looks at the discipline as a whole or when one looks at the evolution of a single house museum, which is often initially saved by preservation minded individuals, but which, as it becomes more mature, evolves into a museum institution which somehow is separated from the preservation mainstream.<sup>8</sup>

Take, for example, the Harrison Gray Otis House – a property saved by a groundbreaking preservation organization in the early twentieth century. William Sumner Appleton, the founder of SPNEA, devised a five-step methodology for preserving historic buildings that closely parallels today’s preservation philosophy. The methodology included admonitions to document work, save samples of the original when it must be replaced, and mark new work so that it can be distinguished from original fabric.<sup>9</sup> In fact, upholstery tacks embedded in woodwork at the Otis House tell the story of Appleton’s restoration of the building by marking the new and restored fabric.

It has been argued that most of SPNEA’s properties are multi-generational and “the decision to exhibit these properties without attempting to restore them to their original appearance is a natural extension of Appleton’s objective appreciation of different architectural periods. He relished the coexistence of successive styles in one building and scorned prettified restorations.”<sup>10</sup> While this may be true, there is no doubt

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<sup>7</sup> Frank E. Sanchis III, “Looking Back or Looking Forward? House Museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (paper presented at the Athenaeum of Philadelphia Symposium, Philadelphia, Pa., December 1998), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Sanchis, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Coolidge and Nancy Padnos, “William Sumner Appleton and the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities,” *Antiques* 129, no. 3 (March 1986): 592.

<sup>10</sup> Coolidge and Padnos, 593.





the Harrison Gray Otis House was stripped of layers of history in an effort to restore it to an approximation of its original appearance for didactic purposes, beginning very shortly after its initial preservation.

When SPNEA purchased the Otis House in 1916, the exterior of the house looked quite different from Bulfinch's original design, with a projecting entranceway, oriel window, dormers, and exterior shutters. (Figure 11) Over the course of nearly a century, work was undertaken in accordance with "the Society's goal from 1916 onwards [as] the restoration of the Otis House façade by degrees to its original Bulfinch appearance."<sup>11</sup> Initially, the "façade was restored...to much of its former importance with the removal of the enclosed 'storm' porch and recreation of the Palladian window in the second story and fan light in the third story above it."<sup>12</sup> Later restoration included the removal of elements mistakenly restored by the Society during the early decades of the century, particularly the "circular porch which...graced the façade of the Otis House since 1920....The Bulfinch design was conceived without such a porch [and] the present construction, a product of the first restoration, must be regarded as somewhat imaginary in character."<sup>13</sup>

Interiors were first installed as a historic house museum in 1926, and that installation was improved over the years through the advances in museum theory, not necessarily for reasons of preservation or restoration. Abbott Lowell Cummings did regard the room installations as part of the restoration of the Otis House to the Federal

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<sup>11</sup> Abbott Lowell Cummings, "The First Harrison Gray Otis House," *Old-Time New England* 60, no. 3 (Winter 1970): 108.

<sup>12</sup> Cummings, 105.

<sup>13</sup> Cummings, 106-7.



period; writing in the 1960s, Cummings detailed paint analysis, wallpaper discoveries, and “renewed attention to fabrics, floor coverings and furnishings”<sup>14</sup> as integral components of the restoration process. But the restoration was undertaken to educate visitors, not to preserve the building. Now SPNEA is in the process of un-restoring the building in order to tell the story of its preservation. It is clear that the evolution and preservation of the house and its use as a museum are inextricably intertwined.

A result of this tension is that the exterior preservation and restorations often do not relate to one another. The Morris-Jumel Mansion in New York City, for example, was recently restored “to its ‘Jumel period,’ the era of most historical and architectural significance”<sup>15</sup> by the firm of Jan Hird Pokorny Architects and Planners. While the exterior of the house has been restored to the house’s early-nineteenth century appearance, the interior remains a series of period rooms interpreting 1765, the 1770s encampment by George Washington, and the later Jumel period. It seems that in many professionals’ minds the exterior and interior remain separate entities, the spheres of preservationists and museum administrators respectively. But it cannot be denied that both need to work in tandem to create an effective interpretation. It is only logical that historic house museums retaining historic fabric from different periods, like the Spencer-Peirce-Little Farm or Wyck, are much more effective portrayals of diachronic interpretation than those that have been previously restored to one period of the building’s history. Just as a building’s residents, uses, and interior spaces evolve over

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<sup>14</sup> Cummings, 105-6.

<sup>15</sup> Sheri Olson, “Where Washington Slept, a City Restores and Restores and Restores.” *Architectural Record* 182, no. 10 (October 1994): 44-49.



time, so too does its exterior. To interpret one without the support of the other forces the visitor to work very hard to understand the discrepancy.<sup>16</sup>

### ***How Diachronic Interpretation Respects Physical Fabric***

Leaving aside the question of exterior versus interior, there are some generalizations that can be made about the positive impact of diachronic interpretation on the physical fabric of traditional historic house museums. By interpreting all phases of a building's history, there is an increased likelihood that original fabric will be allowed to remain. In addition, diachronic interpretation can be an effective pedagogical tool if the story that the site has decided to interpret is that of the building's physical history.

It is ironic that so many sites choose diachronic interpretation in an effort to *broaden* the story that they tell. In reality, diachronic interpretation *narrows* the story told. The interpretation becomes focused on the history of the building itself, rather than on the people who used it. Diverse stories of family life are important only in their intersection with the house's history, their "moment in time" in the house. As noted earlier, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum prides itself on interpreting the diverse immigrant experience. But the lives that are interpreted are – by necessity – those of immigrants *who lived in the tenement at 97 Orchard Street*. The building is the reason for the stories. In a historic house museum, everything comes back to the object: the house. Because diachronic interpretation is a better way to tell the history of the *building*, it can be seen as a positive for the physical fabric of the site.

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<sup>16</sup> By extension, this concept can be broadened to include the landscape. Virtually every site visited for this thesis was in the process of contemplating landscape interpretation.





Decatur House, in Washington, D.C., is currently reinterpreting its site from two periods to one moment in time. The house has been changed in some significant ways from Benjamin Latrobe's 1817 design: doorways have been removed and others installed, for example, a parquet ballroom floor and Colonial Revival ceiling paintings were installed on the second floor. By interpreting both the Federal and Colonial Revival aspects of the building, all the changes made over time remained programmatically valid and so did not need to be removed or covered. The shift back to Latrobe's original plan for the house has necessitated at least one significant structural change, as well as the encapsulation of parquet floors and ceiling paintings. Decatur House staff are committed to making the changes "as reversible as possible" and believe that the shift from diachronic to synchronic interpretation will allow the site to more appropriately interpret "one of only three private homes designed by Latrobe that are still standing."<sup>17</sup>

The installation of diachronic interpretation can present didactic opportunities, as well. Sites are becoming more interested in interpreting ongoing restoration projects, rather than cordoning them off from the public. At the Octagon Museum in Washington, D.C., a recent restoration was interpreted through the use of labels identifying "the many investigations being conducted. When discoveries puzzled the experts, signs posed questions. Sketches, diagrams, and historic images formed a self-guided interpretation of current conservation and restoration issues throughout the house."<sup>18</sup> Decatur House is using the opportunity to share new discoveries with its visitors through guided tours of rooms in the process of being restored. Interpretation of restoration projects can "educate

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<sup>17</sup> Sheri Levinsky, phone interview by author, 28 February 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Hovey, Lonnie J. "Hard Hat House Tours? Interpreting Restoration Projects." *Association for Preservation Technology Bulletin* 27, no.4 (1996): 25.



and excite a broad audience to the complexities of preservation....By opening our doors and expanding the interpretive opportunities, we empower the public to understand its role in shaping the built environment.”<sup>19</sup> If it is assumed that diachronic interpretation is most effective for interpreting a building’s story, the interpretation of reinterpretation itself provides the opportunity to establish themes that will be central once the new installation is complete.

Finally, the physical fabric can be used as a factor in ensuring the diachronic interpretation will survive staffing changes. Hope Lodge provides an excellent example of this. The current diachronic interpretation manifests itself physically through interior finishes, specifically through differences in paint colors and floor varnish. These physical elements took about five years to complete, largely through the work of volunteer labor. The fact that the site would have to repaint or re-treat the floors of half of the house is enough of a financial and time constraint to ensure that the installation will not be de-installed in the near future.<sup>20</sup> Despite the fact that the staff member who initiated the reinterpretation is no longer at Hope Lodge, her vision has endured beyond her tenure at the site.

### *Negative Impacts on Physical Fabric*

At Hope Lodge, the physical impact of interpreting two periods on the interior of the building was minimal. Even though the work was costly and labor-intensive, no original fabric had to be removed or disguised in order to install the various period

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<sup>19</sup> Hovey, 25.

<sup>20</sup> Patricia Mousley, interview by author, Philadelphia, Pa., 30 January 2002.



rooms. Unfortunately, this is not the case for many sites that choose to interpret their historic house in a diachronic fashion. In order to tell their new story, sites that have previously interpreted one moment in time may have to disturb restoration work or to encapsulate historic fabric from a later period.

At the Harrison Gray Otis House, for example, while the proposed diachronic interpretation does not affect the majority of the rooms that have previously been restored to one moment in time,<sup>21</sup> a complication occurs in one of the currently uninterpreted rooms, the parlor chamber. “As part of a strategy to create an historically appropriate interior with original wallpapers salvaged from other historic houses, two sets of different scenic wallpapers were mounted together in 1954,”<sup>22</sup> covering the walls of the room. Although “the house dates from a period in which scenic wallpapers could have been installed, it was most common for them to be mounted on the first floor in parlors, dining rooms, or entry halls.”<sup>23</sup> In order to install the room as the Otis’s bedchamber, a more appropriate patterned wallpaper would have to be used, necessitating the removal of the valuable scenic wallpaper.

A consultant was brought in to “ascertain the feasibility of their removal for archival storage.”<sup>24</sup> The papers were deemed too fragile to remove, since it was “inevitable that even a very careful removal of the wallpapers as rolls would be the cause

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<sup>21</sup> The only currently interpreted room that would have a change in finishes is the ell chamber, whose reproduction wallpaper and inaccurate paint color would be replaced for its installation as a boarding house room of the 1850s.

<sup>22</sup> T.K. McClintock, “Scenic Wallpapers at the Harrison Gray Otis House” (report to the Society for the preservation of New England Antiquities, 8 January 2001), 1.

<sup>23</sup> McClintock, 1. The second owner of the Otis House did in fact install “landscape murals painted on paper” between 1807 and 1822, according to Nylander’s “The First...”

<sup>24</sup> McClintock, 1.





of some damage.”<sup>25</sup> Curator and wallpaper expert Richard Nylander agreed that the paper was in too poor condition to be removed and “that was not even an option.”<sup>26</sup>

Instead, the scenic wallpaper was to be encapsulated in place, with a panel left open so that visitors could literally witness the layers of the room’s history.<sup>27</sup>

Several options for encapsulation were discussed by SPNEA. The project consultant suggested three different covering systems: adhering a protective layer of Japanese paper to the scenic papers, covering the walls with a semi-rigid material, like synthetic linen, or covering the walls with rigid panels.<sup>28</sup> However, estimates were prohibitively expensive and staff conservators ultimately used the recommendations as a basis for their own research. After consulting with several European conservators, Zana Wolf proposed a covering system based on linen that would be primed and sized and then installed over the existing paper; new wallpaper would be hung on lining paper attached to the linen scrim. However, when a mock-up was tested, “the adhesive warped the system and the wallpaper bubbled out from the sized linen.”<sup>29</sup>

Wolf was working at SPNEA funded by a grant that ran out shortly after the failed mock-up. Though the linen system had advocates within the Society, and “would not have been all that expensive,” the Property Care department took the project over and opted to nail 1/4” sheetrock to the chair rail and cornice and hang reproduction paper over that.<sup>30</sup> (Figure 12) Wolf believes that “the whole project could have waited another

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<sup>25</sup> McClintock, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Zana Wolf, phone interview by author, 19 February 2002.

<sup>27</sup> This particular layer would seem very hard to communicate with the visitor, since the wallpaper is not original to the house or appropriate to the room, but rather an example of a restoration mistake.

<sup>28</sup> McClintock, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Wolf, interview.

<sup>30</sup> Wolf, interview; Peter Gittelman, phone interview by author, 31 October 2001.





year” for additional funding, rather than instituting a “system [that] has not been used or tested but is cheap.”<sup>31</sup>

Wolf might be said to represent the preservation stance on this issue, while Peter Gittelman represents an interpretation-based philosophy. Gittelman believes that the wallpaper incident “forced us to be innovative.” He admits that he and the Otis House Site Manager tend to be “liberal with building fabric” when asking how intrusive SPNEA should be “in order to tell the story we want to tell,” asking “why are we preserving it when people are not coming in” to the Otis House.<sup>32</sup>

The Otis House example is illustrative of the difficulties that restored historic house museums might encounter when attempting to update their restoration through diachronic interpretation. These difficulties are, of course, subject to the amount of restoration that has taken place prior to the reinterpretation; a historic house museum that has not had extensive restoration work in the past might not face the same questions that a more complete restoration has. However, the extent of the controversy over methods for protecting the Otis House’s period wallpaper – itself a restoration mistake – and the implications that protecting that mistake has for the building’s original Federal period molding, clearly demonstrate the depth of passion among both museum professionals and historic preservationists for their fields.

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<sup>31</sup> Wolf, interview. Wolf notes that the linen system would have cost about \$2500 and would have been much thinner, compromising less of the molding profiles.

<sup>32</sup> Gittelman, interview.



### *Additional Considerations*

It is essential that any physical changes undertaken as part of a diachronic reinterpretation be documented for future generations. This is especially true today, when the concept of understanding the past through a contemporary lens is more often being interpreted for the visitor. Acknowledgement of this fact leads museum professionals to comment that they “look forward to reinterpreting my own reinterpretations.”<sup>33</sup> The frequency of reinterpretation, and frequency of staff changes, make documentation a critical factor for any such project.

At Decatur House, the Director of Buildings and Collections, Bruce Whitmarsh, who supervises the physical work currently being undertaken at that site, is attempting “to document and create a coherent set of records, including photos and drawings” detailing the project.<sup>34</sup> He also keeps a daily log of work done at the site, noting that it may be important in the future. Decatur House has had two major renovations in the recent past, one in 1940s by the last residents of the house and the other in the 1960s by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, who used the site as its headquarters. The documentation in both cases was “skimpy,” according to Whitmarsh, leading him to almost demolish an original wall in the ell of the house: “because of the lack of documentation, we had no idea. Had we known about it earlier, we could have planned earlier.”<sup>35</sup>

Documentation of the project should ideally go beyond just the physical work of restoration to incorporate the decision-making process. At the Harrison Gray Otis House,

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<sup>33</sup> Tracey Linton Craig, “‘Reinterpreting’ the Past,” *Museum News* 68, no. 1 (January- February 1989): 63.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce Whitmarsh, phone interview by author, 15 March 2002.

<sup>35</sup> Whitmarsh, interview.



meeting minutes of the Otis House Project Committee were printed on acid-free paper and included as part of the compiled project documentation in SPNEA's archives.<sup>36</sup> In addition, the project was photographed, videotaped, and oral histories with Abbott Lowell Cummings and other staff members who used the building were done.<sup>37</sup>

Reinterpretation can also serve as an opportunity to perform much-needed mechanical systems updates. Both Decatur House and the Otis House are introducing new HVAC systems as part of their reinterpreive plans. At Decatur, Bruce Whitmarsh notes that "people don't give money to put in new HVAC, nor do granting agencies."<sup>38</sup> Decatur House's HVAC system was installed in the 1960s, was poorly maintained, and is ten years beyond its expected life. By restoring the house through the fundable reinterpreive program, the Trust found money to replace the HVAC system. Whitmarsh acknowledges that "the reinterpretation and the HVAC are definitely intertwined," and that the latter could not have been accomplished without the former.<sup>39</sup> Sanchis notes that historic house museums "must deal with the solomonic problem of dividing scarce resources between their dual missions of preservation and education;"<sup>40</sup> diachronic reinterpretation may be a way to assuage both sides of the equation.

Ultimately, diachronic interpretation may prove to be an effective method of reconciling what have been characterized as competing interests between historic house museums and the preservation community. Historic house museums have the:

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<sup>36</sup> Though it was suggested that meetings of the Project Committee be audio taped, it was ultimately decided that audio tapes are not permanent and that minutes would suffice.

<sup>37</sup> Otis House Project Committee Meeting Minutes, 4 January 2000.

<sup>38</sup> Whitmarsh, interview.

<sup>39</sup> Whitmarsh, interview.

<sup>40</sup> Sanchis, 4.





potential to influence the American public to embrace the cause of the family of historic preservation [since they are] real places, where you can hear about preservation and witness it at the same time. Historic sites have the power to demonstrate preservation, to educate the public in both its philosophy and practice.<sup>41</sup>

Diachronic interpretations, in houses that have not previously been restored to a moment in time, can undoubtedly serve this role, since they present to the audience a tangible example of a house's evolution over time. In the case of historic house museums that have been taken back to a single moment, the work needed to un-restore the building may negate its preservation in the first place.

#### *Case Study: Decatur House, Washington, D.C.*

Decatur House (Figure 13) is a property of the National Trust for Historic Preservation located adjacent to the White House in Washington, D.C. The house, designed in 1818 by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, has been interpreted to reflect two different periods for the past forty years: the Federal era of construction on the first floor, and the Victorian interior of the last owners, the Beale family, on the second. (Figures 14 and 15) The site is currently in the process of changing the diachronic interpretation to one that reflects only the earliest period of occupation. Decatur House provides an interesting example of the difficulties one site has faced with diachronic interpretation; it also illustrates the complexities of returning a building to a moment in time.

Commodore Stephen Decatur, who earned his fortune and reputation fighting the Barbary pirates, commissioned Latrobe to design a house "suitable for foreign ministers"

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<sup>41</sup> Sanchis, 2.



and “impressive entertainments.”<sup>42</sup> Decatur and his wife had only lived in the house for fourteen months when Decatur’s life “abruptly ended...when a naval officer who harbored a long-standing professional grudge against Decatur shot him in a duel in a Maryland field.”<sup>43</sup> After his death, Decatur House went through “a series of acquisitions by prominent men followed by protracted ownership by their widows, who, to an unusual degree, shaped the property’s history.”<sup>44</sup> Susan Decatur rented the house to various foreign ministers for fifteen years, after which time it served as the unofficial residence of the Secretary of State until 1835. During this period, Henry Clay, Martin Van Buren, and Edward Livingston all lived in the house.

In 1836, the house was purchased by John Gadsby, “the owner of the National Hotel and reputed to be the wealthiest member of Washington’s emerging class;” Gadsby was also a slaveholder and built a wing to house his fifteen slaves.<sup>45</sup> Like Susan Decatur before her, Gadsby’s widow rented the property to politicians after her husband’s death. During the Civil War, the house was appropriated by the Union Army for use as a warehouse for its clothing department. The Union also “requested permission from the Gadsby estate to reconfigure the house’s interior walls and converted [sic] first- and second-floor parlors, dining rooms, and drawing rooms into offices and the servants wing into barracks, although the reply remains a matter of conjecture.”<sup>46</sup>

Decatur House’s next owners, former navy lieutenant Edward Fitzgerald Beale

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<sup>42</sup> As quoted in Kim Keister, “Influence and Ambition,” *Historic Preservation* 47, no. 2 (March-April 1995): 53.

<sup>43</sup> Keister, “Influence and Ambition,” 55.

<sup>44</sup> Keister, “Influence and Ambition,” 55.

<sup>45</sup> Keister, “Influence and Ambition,” 56.

<sup>46</sup> Keister, “Influence and Ambition,” 59.



and his wife Mary, “revived Decatur House as the unofficial social center of Washington.”<sup>47</sup> The couple “substantially altered the aesthetic decorative character of the entire structure with the addition of brownstone trim at the first floor door and windows;”<sup>48</sup> on the interior, they “commissioned ceiling murals imitating canopies of leaves, and they installed an immense mosaic of the seal of California emblazoned in rare woods on the second-floor dining room floor.”<sup>49</sup> The Beales entertained Washington society, including Presidents Grant, Hayes, Garfield, and Arthur, in the house.

Truxton Beale and his second wife Marie continued the tradition of entertaining Washington’s “uniformed diplomats and their bejeweled wives”<sup>50</sup> at Decatur House. Marie Beale is remembered as the woman who saved Decatur House, first by hiring HABS architect Thomas T. Waterman “to undertake a partial restoration of the house in 1943-44.”<sup>51</sup> She was “deliberately seeking to recapture the original Latrobe character of the architecture and Decatur character of the furnishings, particularly on the first floor”<sup>52</sup> through removing the Victorian sandstone trim on the exterior and painting over the ceiling murals on the house’s first floor. Marie Beale bequeathed the property to the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1956, and “like thousands of historical organizations across the country [including the Harrison Gray Otis House], the Trust divided its historic house into a museum and its headquarters, a decision that required considerable alterations.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Keister, “Influence and Ambition,” 59.

<sup>48</sup> John N. Pearce, “Decatur House Furnishings 1818-1967: The Classical and the Victorian Styles on Lafayette Square,” *Historic Preservation* 19, no. 3-4 (July-December 1967): 25-37.

<sup>49</sup> Keister, “Influence and Ambition,” 59, 113.

<sup>50</sup> Keister, “Influence and Ambition,” 113.

<sup>51</sup> Keister, “Influence and Ambition,” 113.

<sup>52</sup> Pearce, 35.

<sup>53</sup> Keister, “Influence and Ambition,” 113.





The interpretation of Decatur House has been, like the house itself, filled with contrary opinions and a consistency of change, particularly in recent years. The historic house museum was first interpreted for the public in 1958, at which time the Trust “defied conventional wisdom...by essentially carrying on Marie Beale’s practice of furnishing the first floor to Decatur’s era and preserving her in-laws’ Victorian scheme on the second floor.”<sup>54</sup> The Trust acknowledged that this may not have been Marie Beale’s intention, but asserted that “although [her] bequests to others of a number of major items from the second floor suggest that she may have anticipated development of exhibits other than the Beale furnishings in this area, we have felt that a valuable double lesson, about Washington furnishings from 1818 to the present, is made available through the scheme adopted.”<sup>55</sup> It is interesting that the original diachronic interpretation was focused on decorative arts and change within that context, rather than the broader themes that today’s diachronic interpretations aim to communicate.

Decatur House underwent a “dramatic shift in the interpretation of the first floor rooms” in 1979, reinterpreting those spaces to reflect an inventory taken at the time of Decatur’s death in March of 1820 rather than Marie Beale’s conception of a Federal interior.<sup>56</sup> The second floor remained a reflection of the Beale period; interestingly, though, over the years it had shifted from an interpretation of the Victorian Beale family to one that expressed instead the Colonial Revival lifestyle of Marie Beale.

Then, in 1990, a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) self-study entitled *Ambition and Influence: Interpreting the Decatur House* brought together a

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<sup>54</sup> Keister, “Influence and Ambition,” 113.

<sup>55</sup> Pearce, 37.

<sup>56</sup> Sheri Levinsky, “Draft Interpretive Plan,” (1 August 2001), 2.





diverse group of scholars to discuss how the diachronic interpretation of the historic house museum might be improved. The group determined that, as interpreted, “the guided tour...was narrow in focus and gave little sense of how the history of Decatur House related to the history of Washington.” In addition, “the staff expressed frustration about interpreting the two very different periods revealed in the house and its collection,” saying that they tried to use elite entertaining as a linking theme but that it trivialized the significance of the property.<sup>57</sup>

The assembled scholars acknowledged that “the choice of interpretive focus is somewhat problematic,” in that the significant first owner only lived in the house for a short period, the house itself had a complex history involving mostly renters, and the collection was “wonderful, but diverse.”<sup>58</sup> Most of the group “took the view that the significance...lies above all in [Decatur House’s] relationship to the city of Washington.”<sup>59</sup> They felt that “as a National Trust site, Decatur House has a strong mandate to serve a broad public” and noted that the house is “important and fascinating not because of any one period, but because of the layers of occupancy going back from its beginnings up into the twentieth century.”<sup>60</sup>

The self-study determined that the significance of Decatur House “lay in its renowned architect, prominent location and in its long line of socially and politically notable residents.”<sup>61</sup> It advocated the interpretation of more than two periods of the

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<sup>57</sup> *Ambition and Influence: Interpreting Decatur House*, National Endowment for the Humanities Self-Study (24-25 May 1990), 1.

<sup>58</sup> *Ambition and Influence*, 4.

<sup>59</sup> *Ambition and Influence*, 6.

<sup>60</sup> *Ambition and Influence*, 6.

<sup>61</sup> Levinsky, “Draft Interpretive Plan,” 4.



house's history, saying "the recommended shift in interpretive emphasis from a dichotomy between the house's Federal-era builder and Gilded Age owner to a full narration of the property's inhabitants places the house more firmly in the context of American social history."<sup>62</sup> The proposed reinterpretation would maintain the existing second floor installation, but would introduce changes to the first floor: installing one room as Decatur's office, acknowledging the three Secretaries of State who rented the house in its early years, and changing the dining room to reflect the house's use as a Civil War clothing depot.<sup>63</sup> The methods for introducing additional interpretive periods were varied. One member of the committee noted that she "like[d] the idea of one of the first floor rooms installed as a Civil War clothing depot behind a scrim of the dining room. I think it would be quite powerful."<sup>64</sup>

The self-study did caution that a review and additional research were needed before the implementation of the above recommendations.<sup>65</sup> It acknowledged that "the strength of the site is also its weakness," in terms of the "abundance of stories [Decatur House] has to tell"<sup>66</sup> and was deemed "essential...that these varying stories be tied together by clearly stated themes, or the effect will only be intensified confusion."<sup>67</sup> One suggested theme, as at the Otis House, was that houses that persist over time change; another was that Decatur House's location meant important people lived there. A final

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<sup>62</sup> Levinsky, "Draft Interpretive Plan," 4.

<sup>63</sup> *Ambition and Influence*, 7.

<sup>64</sup> *Ambition and Influence*, 11.

<sup>65</sup> *Ambition and Influence*, 10. In fact, though one room was eventually interpreted as recommended as Decatur's office, it has recently been discovered that the room was actually the Decatur kitchen and so is today being reinterpreted as such.

<sup>66</sup> *Ambition and Influence*, appendix, "Interpreting the Historic House."

<sup>67</sup> *Ambition and Influence*, appendix, "Interpreting the Historic House."



caution was that such a reinterpretation “would require very careful preparation of the basic tour narrative and excellent training of guides.”<sup>68</sup>

Participants felt quite passionate about interpreting more than just two periods at Decatur. One asserted that “it shouts out these living overlays, it shouts out the fact that houses do change over time, different people do live in them. They are not monuments. It’s the shock of reality rather than the consecration of unreality.”<sup>69</sup> But an article appearing in the National Trust’s magazine praising the steps toward the recommended reinterpretation also quoted staff as being skeptical about the self-study’s results. Then-property director Vicki Sopher was quoted as saying:

Anybody in the museum world will tell you that a house museum needs to interpret a specific time or a specific person....That puts us in a quandry because we’ve been told by a panel of our peers that an abstraction developed over many decades by many residents of Decatur House is the message that should be told here....I always thought it would be nice if we could simplify our interpretation....Now we have all of these other years for which we have compiled very little research.<sup>70</sup>

The article followed Sopher’s quote by saying “one of the most exciting aspects of Decatur House is the degree of mystery that still shrouds the property,”<sup>71</sup> though it is doubtful if all staff would have agreed with that assessment. Rather than assuage the staff’s stated concerns, the reinterpretation put forth by the self-study review appeared not to take any practical considerations about implementation into account.

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<sup>68</sup> *Ambition and Influence*, appendix, “Interpreting the Historic House.”

<sup>69</sup> *Ambition and Influence*, 35.

<sup>70</sup> Keister, “Ambition and Influence,” 113, 116.

<sup>71</sup> Keister, “Ambition and Influence,” 116.





In fact, today, instead of installing more period rooms, Decatur House is “recreating itself as the home Commodore Stephen Decatur had built for him and his wife in 1818 by Benjamin Henry Latrobe.”<sup>72</sup> There are multiple reasons for the return to one period, spanning 1818 to 1835, which interestingly parallel those cited by historic house museums that are choosing to interpret diachronically. Staff reasoning combines a desire for good scholarship, an evaluation of the most important story the site has to tell, and “what we believe as a staff and board from a marketing standpoint.”<sup>73</sup> They feel that shortening the period of history interpreted does allow the site to tell “interesting new stories” that got lost when the tour spanned such a long period.<sup>74</sup> These stories include the house’s use as the residence of Secretaries of State Van Buren, Clay, and Livingston.

The new interpretation has been clearly laid out in an statement of purpose stating: “the purpose of Decatur House is to interpret the formation of nineteenth-century American political and social values as they emphasize the cultural and social history of our nation and our nation’s capital while relating to the house, its location, architecture, preservation, and occupants.”<sup>75</sup> One way in which social history will be introduced into the new interpretation is by creating three separate themed tours that will be offered each day. They will focus on Decatur House’s architecture, entertaining, and slavery in the urban context of Washington, D.C. Thus, while the installation may first appear to be a standard Federal-era historic house interior, visitors with special interests will have the opportunity to find out about aspects of the site in-depth.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Levinsky, “Draft Interpretive Plan,” 4.

<sup>73</sup> Whitmarsh, interview.

<sup>74</sup> Whitmarsh, interview.

<sup>75</sup> Levinsky, “Draft Interpretive Plan,” 10.

<sup>76</sup> Levinsky, interview.



Sheri Levinsky, Director of Education and Programs at the site, asserts that “a new interpretive vision is of paramount importance to the future of Decatur House as a museum.”<sup>77</sup> She cites the “emerging interest in [Latrobe’s] legacy and classical design”<sup>78</sup> as a major factor in the decision to reinterpret to Decatur House’s original period. This interest will only be heightened by the fact that Latrobe’s other two surviving private homes, as well as some of the architect’s public buildings, are also in the process of restoration; the sites hope to launch a joint project entitled “Latrobe’s America.” Levinsky hopes the project will establish Latrobe as an American architect with the same name recognition as Frank Lloyd Wright.<sup>79</sup>

Another way in which the shift to the Latrobe period may attract new audiences lies in the house museum’s proximity to the White House. By interpreting the Secretaries of State who lived in Decatur House in the years immediately following Decatur’s death (Martin Van Buren, Henry Clay, and Edward Livingston), the site re-establishes its connection to the White House and early American politics. The site therefore has the potential to reach an audience beyond the traditional historic house museum visitor.

Levinsky believes that the audience attracted to Decatur House is primarily interested in the architecture of the historic house museum. Mieke Fay, a graduate student in Museum Education who worked at Decatur House, conducted a visitor survey for the site in the summer of 2001. Although the results show a fairly even division between visitors who liked the contrast of the Decatur and Beale periods and those who

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<sup>77</sup> Levinsky, “Draft Interpretive Plan,” 5.

<sup>78</sup> Levinsky, “Draft Interpretive Plan,” 5.

<sup>79</sup> Levinsky, interview.



are interested in the architecture, Levinsky contends that “visitors had problems with the jump in time.”<sup>80</sup>

In fact, the survey reveals that what visitors responded to more than anything was the *process of restoration* itself, saying they found “the conversion of the house to the Victorian style and back again” and the fact that “you’re still exploring history to find out what life was like and what the house was like at the time”<sup>81</sup> most interesting. Bruce Whitmarsh confirms that “visitors love this stuff. Once things are safer, I will probably do a hard-hat tour.”<sup>82</sup> Since the restoration project is scheduled to last until 2005, and since the site’s philosophy is to “try to do as much as we can in plain view to show the process of preservation and the work we’re doing,”<sup>83</sup> it seems likely that the reinterpretation of Decatur House will succeed in reaching new visitors and attracting repeat ones.

Decatur House staff has been extremely involved in the reinterpretation decision-making process, and in fact it seems that the decision was very much a mutual one and not spearheaded by one staff member in particular. Staff took several retreats and “spent a lot of time examining the impact” of the reinterpretation.<sup>84</sup> They describe themselves as “really excited to put the architecture back as best we know”<sup>85</sup> and share that excitement with volunteers through almost-daily e-mail messages. Levinsky asserts that

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<sup>80</sup> Levinsky, interview.

<sup>81</sup> Decatur House Visitor Survey, Summer 2001.

<sup>82</sup> Whitmarsh, interview.

<sup>83</sup> Whitmarsh, interview.

<sup>84</sup> Whitmarsh, interview.

<sup>85</sup> Levinsky, interview.





the guides “are well-informed and so all are really on board” with the project, expressing interest in “seeing what we are finding.”<sup>86</sup>

In addition to staff and volunteer support, Levinsky notes that the Beale family members still involved with the site are sympathetic to the project. As opposed to opinions expressed by the National Trust in the 1960s, staff now asserts that “Marie Beale started to put the house back to Decatur’s time” through her work on the façade, and “did not want the house interpreted as a shrine to her.”<sup>87</sup>

An important aspect of the Decatur House reinterpretation is the physical work being undertaken “to bring the building back to the best of our understanding to its original design.”<sup>88</sup> This work is both structural and decorative in nature and has been planned “in such a manner that thirty or forty years from now it will be able to be undone” if ideas about the house’s interpretation change.<sup>89</sup> As noted earlier in the chapter, Bruce Whitmarsh, Director of Buildings and Grounds, spends a large portion of his time documenting the work that is being done at the house.

The first two phases of the current scope set the stage for work within the museum spaces. They included the conversion of a room for a new collections storage space, as well as the addition of new heating and cooling for the historic spaces, new fire detection and suppression systems, an ADA compliant elevator, and the installation of an exhibit gallery on the second floor of the service wing, which will be used to interpret the lives of other residents.

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<sup>86</sup> Levinsky, interview.

<sup>87</sup> Levinsky, interview.

<sup>88</sup> Whitmarsh, interview.

<sup>89</sup> Whitmarsh, interview.





Work within Decatur House itself is currently in the planning stages and requires more physical investigation before it begins, according to Whitmarsh. On the first floor, the room interpreted as Decatur's office is being reinstalled as the Decatur kitchen after discoveries made by Latrobe historian Jeffrey A. Cohen. In that space, a plaster ceiling installed in the 1940s will be removed to expose the 1818 ceiling above. Though the 1940s ceiling will be destroyed in the process, a segment of cornice will be saved. In addition, the wooden floor laid by the Beales (the room was their formal dining room) has been pulled up, numbered, wrapped and stored in an effort to return the room to its 1818 appearance.<sup>90</sup> A doorway from this room to the entrance hall, which was not an original feature of the building, will be closed, thereby giving the visitor a better sense of Latrobe's distinction between public and service spaces in the house. (Figure 16)

On the second floor, the major architectural changes occurred in the years following the Civil War. The Beales' lavishly inlaid wood floor will be covered by reproduction carpet replicating what would have been in place in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Whitmarsh believes this is the "best option for the preservation of the floor, because we are improving our protection of it and it is staying put." He worries that if the floor were taken up, pieces might get lost and it would inevitably be damaged. The painted ceiling in the second floor ballroom will be covered in place as well, though a method has not yet been determined.<sup>91</sup>

The only major structural change to the house will be in the second floor dining room, which currently has three doors leading to service space. The central door, which

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<sup>90</sup> Whitmarsh, interview

<sup>91</sup> Whitmarsh, interview.



is capped by an arch, was, in fact, originally a niche; the Beales inserted a doorway in its place. In fact, the door itself was taken from elsewhere on the second floor. That detail will be undone to reflect Latrobe's original plan for the house.<sup>92</sup>

Whitmarsh notes that there were other architectural details that the staff expected to find when they commenced the reinterpretation, based on a better understanding of Latrobe and his career. They have not found evidence of such details yet, however, and since he cannot prove their use in the house, Whitmarsh will not "restore" them.<sup>93</sup>

Decatur House provides an interesting point of comparison with sites that are currently installing diachronic interpretation. Its diachronic interpretation was initially rooted in an object-centered museum philosophy, and it was an interest in improved scholarship, a better story, and increased marketing that convinced the staff to advocate a synchronic interpretation that today might be considered out of date or old-fashioned. In addition, the staff took control of the reinterpretation of the house, considering peer opinions but ultimately making a decision based on their resources. If anything, the Decatur House reinterpretation will succeed simply because of the passionate interest by all staff members and their commitment to establishing Latrobe's legacy as the primary focus of the site for its survival.<sup>94</sup>

The opportunities provided by Decatur House for new interpretation are many. By providing specialized tours about pre-arranged subjects, guides will have a clearer vision of their role as interpreter. Exhibit space within the museum will provide the

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<sup>92</sup> Whitmarsh, interview.

<sup>93</sup> Whitmarsh, interview.

<sup>94</sup> It should be noted that Decatur House is currently without an Executive Director, and the impact of a new staff member on the project remains to be seen.



opportunity to explore the wealth of other Decatur House stories in a structured setting. Decatur House will also be able to tell the story of the building as it functioned within the context of Latrobe's vision of the private home. The reinterpretation will allow the public to see service spaces that they have not experienced at the site to date, and will broaden the context of the Federal-era story.

The physical work that needs to be done to Decatur House to reinterpret the space is similar to work done at the Otis House during its original restorations. However, using today's standards of preservation and documentation, it appears that even a shift back to diachronic interpretation in the coming decades would not be too difficult. The Beale finishes that have been saved thus far will be protected, and the Beale collections will be stored in a new collections area. The Decatur House project shows, in this way, an attempt to merge preservation interests and museum studies theory within a traditional historic house museum.





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EVALUATING DIACHRONIC INTERPRETATION

The introduction of diachronic interpretation through the installation of period rooms in traditional historic house museums is a technique that has both advocates and critics, each equally passionate. An evaluation of the trend toward diachronic interpretation reveals more than anything that the appropriateness of its use depends greatly on the individual circumstances of the site: its staffing, location, collections, past interpretations, and financial situation.

Diachronic interpretation can be an expensive undertaking, particularly if the installation requires the acquisition of new collections or significant physical improvements to the historic house museum. It is also a project that, if left uncompleted, can be much less effective than the interpretation it replaced. In order to determine whether or not diachronic interpretation is the best option for a particular historic house museum, the staff and board must evaluate the following factors:

- **Resources.** The successful introduction of diachronic interpretation involves the resources of a historic house museum at every level: funding, staff, collections, programming, property, and preservation. Such a reinterpretation entails more than simply rearranging furniture or repainting rooms; it means guide training, thematic tour development, capital improvements, fundraising, marketing, and even institutional changes such as revising the mission statement or collections policy. Before embarking on such a project, the organizational capacity of the institution must be accurately evaluated: does staff have the time and skills necessary to institute a diachronic



interpretation? How long will it take to execute the reinterpretation? Has funding already been located?

Perhaps the most overlooked resource that a historic house museum has is the story that makes the site unique, the *theme* that each house museum can express better than any other. The risk with diachronic interpretation is that it enables a site to share everything that is known with its visitors. This danger has increased, of course, as scholarship has improved. Historic house museums should focus instead on developing thematic tours that do “not overwhelm visitors with myriad and often disconnected facts.”<sup>1</sup> Sites must look at their collections, including the historic house itself, in evaluating what story they can best communicate to the public; they must also undertake additional documentary research.

- **Competition.** Though historic house museums may be loathe to admit it, they are in competition for an audience with nearby house museums, other cultural institutions, and even pure entertainment options – films, sporting events, or theme parks. Historic house museums must evaluate the context in which they are located as part of any discussion about reinterpretation. Hope Lodge, for example, succeeds as a diachronic interpretation because, while there are many other house museums in the Philadelphia area that deal with Colonial decorative arts and social history, those that (consciously) interpret the Colonial Revival are much fewer in number. Hope Lodge stands apart from its competition through its choice of interpretive thrust. On the other hand, sites that are located in areas where historic house museums interpret a range of periods might use the

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Abramoff Levy, Sandra Mackenzie Lloyd and Susan Porter Schreiber, *Great Tours! Thematic Tours and Guide Training for Historic Sites* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 4.



opportunity to forge institutional alliances and plan joint programming with neighboring sites, rather than reinstalling their own interpretation.

- ***Audience.*** The importance of conducting a visitor survey in advance of any reinterpretation cannot be overstated. While staff, board, and volunteers all have opinions about what the audience wants and receives from their visit to a historic house museum, without a visitor evaluation to confirm those ideas, museums are doing a great disservice to their audience. Interpretation is meant, above all, to elucidate a site's history to the public, not to garner praise from peers or added support from funders. Sites that fail to undertake visitor surveys – or who chose to selectively interpret results – are not acting in the best interest of the public.
- ***Alternatives.*** Finally, historic house museums should look at the alternatives to introducing period room diachronic interpretation, including new technologies, before settling on a program. Historic houses are thought of as traditional spaces, but the unavoidable fact is that museums are in the midst of a technological revolution. Historic house museums should investigate the technology that art and science museums are turning to in an effort to update and broaden interpretive programming.

The result of evaluating resources, competition, audience and alternatives should be an interpretive plan that clearly sets forth the elements of the story that the site is committed to interpreting to the public. Any interpretive plan should work hand in hand with the mission statement and collections policy to clearly delineate the scope of the interpretation and to lend credibility to later requests for funding.





### ***Ensuring a Successful Diachronic Interpretation***

If, after completing the evaluations outlined above, a historic house museum has decided to move forward with the installation of period rooms, there are several elements that can help make the diachronic interpretation successful. These are:

- ***Commit to a program.*** It is essential that the staff and board prepare a realistic program from the outset and then commit to implementing it. A half-hearted or incomplete interpretation will confuse the visitor, and despite the work that has gone into installing one or two period rooms, ultimately prove ineffectual. The evaluative process and resulting interpretive policy are meant to help a site commit to an interpretive program from the beginning.

Historic house museums should not develop programming without first securing funding; herein lies the importance of evaluating financial resources, as recommended above. When a site has decided that diachronic interpretation using period rooms is a viable option, funding must have already been taken into account. Staff and board cannot allow themselves to be distracted by new museum trends or technologies during the implementation of diachronic interpretation; ideally, some of these issues should have been addressed during the “evaluating alternatives” phase.

The success of any interpretive program rests, for the most part, in the site’s commitment to the project and the results it expects to realize from its implementation. Whether the interpretation is the most “cutting edge,” or the most “technologically advanced,” matters less in terms of efficacy in reaching an audience than genuine enthusiasm and passion for the site’s programming and the story it has to tell.





- ***Focus on orientation.*** A second element that can greatly increase the efficacy of a diachronic interpretation is to focus on the orientation program. Whether it be a video or slide show, exhibit panels, or simply a clear tour script, it is essential that the visitor understand the period room concept from the outset of the tour. Orientation also provides an excellent opportunity to introduce the theme or themes that will be used to tie the diachronic interpretation together.
- ***Develop a thematic tour.*** As noted above, diachronic interpretation cannot provide the visitor with a “broader” sense of history by simply reciting a longer list of names and dates. Period rooms and their accompanying stories should be linked by a series of themes to help the visitor understand how the various pieces of history fit together.

Instead of attempting to:

tell visitors *everything* there is to know about a site, sites should focus on the information they truly want visitors to remember....Most sites will find that three to five significant ideas or themes typically work best. When these themes are woven together, they provide a storyline that is a succinct, yet compelling summary of the important ideas, events, and features that make a site special.<sup>2</sup>

With diachronic interpretations, especially, developing themes are critical for assisting the visitor in understanding the context and importance of what they are seeing.

- ***Involve volunteers in the process from the beginning.*** Rather than viewing volunteers as a potential roadblock to success, involving them in the process of diachronic reinterpretation from the start can provide a historic house museum with an incredible asset. Volunteers can assist with physical changes to the site, as at Hope

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<sup>2</sup> Levy, Lloyd and Schreiber, 4.



Lodge; in addition, they can be recruited to undertake much of the documentary research necessary to update the tour script or training materials. Barbara Silberman of the Heritage Investment Program strongly advocates using volunteers to assist with reinterpreive work,<sup>3</sup> signaling the funding potential of such projects. But in addition to securing additional dollars, involving volunteers from the beginning is a sure way to build institutional support for diachronic interpretation at every level; many historic house museum volunteers view the site as “their” house, and keeping them up-to-date on progress provides a sense of continuity even during a time of change.

- ***Document the project.*** The process of installing diachronic interpretation should be documented on several different levels. First, the decision-making process used to evaluate interpretive techniques should be recorded so that future generations of site managers can understand the reasoning behind the installation of period rooms. This might be done, as at the Otis House, by reproducing meeting minutes on acid-free paper; in addition, sites should follow SPNEA’s example in using the reinterpreive process as an opportunity to conduct oral histories with former staff about past interpretive decisions.

Historic house museums should also document the physical work done as part of the installation of diachronic interpretation. Documentation might include, as at Decatur House, photographs, drawings, and notes. Samples of all removed fabric must be preserved. Documentation of the physical reinterpretation not only provides critical information to future site administrators, but it can also be used in an exhibit format to communicate the process of preservation and restoration with the visitor.

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Silberman, interview by author, Philadelphia, Pa., 11 March 2001.



- *Continue to monitor visitor response and volunteer training.* Once a diachronic interpretation has been fully installed, staff cannot simply rest until the next interpretive trend presents itself. Rather, the historic house museum must continue to conduct visitor evaluations to ascertain whether or not the chosen storyline is being effectively communicated to the audience, as well as to determine if the reinterpretation has indeed succeeded in bringing new audiences to the site.

Volunteers, too, must receive ongoing training. The role of the historic house museum guide is critical to the success of any diachronic interpretation; without their understanding of the significant concepts, insight into the site's history, and support of the project, there is a very real chance that visitors will not receive the vision of the site that diachronic interpretation was meant to provide. A strong guide training program, including regular reviews, is one way to ensure the success of diachronic interpretation.

### ***Evaluating Diachronic Interpretation***

Traditional historic house museums hold a precarious position in American material culture; they are three things at once - artifact, custodian and programmatic space. House museums have a responsibility both to preserve their collection and interpret it collection for public benefit, and sometimes that dual mission provides institutional conflict. Which comes first, many professionals ask: the object or the purpose? Preservationists and museum professionals would likely answer that question differently; surprisingly, there is room for debate within each field as well.





These debates are, in many ways, relatively new for the historic house museum community, which has shifted from “being about privilege to being about relevance.”<sup>4</sup> Some historic house museums are turning to diachronic interpretation as a way to mitigate the competing interests of museum studies versus preservation, or of object versus story, within their site. They use diachronic interpretation as a way to share with the public the entire history of their building, including its preservation. At the same time, house museums are enabled through the technique to discuss issues of the more immediate past, like immigration and class. Professionals who ask, “why not begin to seriously educate the public about life in the middle to late 1900s?”<sup>5</sup> turn to diachronic interpretation as a way to broaden their scope without losing sight of the original interpretive focus of the museum.

In recent years, historic house museums have repeatedly had to defend their numbers, their decreasing visitation, and their elitist past. In 1998, Mount Vernon’s James C. Rees, speaking at a symposium on the historic house museum, noted that although “tourism is up dramatically across the nation...history museums and living history sites have faced stagnant attendance in recent years.”<sup>6</sup> Sites have turned to diachronic interpretation as the cure-all, as the method by which their relevance will be proven once again – a way to increase visitation and attract new audiences, a way to move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Historic house museums should not overlook the many options for revealing layers of their site’s history that new technology provides, moving

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<sup>4</sup> Karie Diethorn, interview by author, Philadelphia, Pa., 31 October 2001.

<sup>5</sup> John Sherrer, “A Timely Alternative: Telling Your Story through ‘Evolved Site’ Interpretation” (paper presented at the McFadden-Ward House Conference, Beaumont, Texas, November 2001), 27.

<sup>6</sup> James C. Rees, “Forever the Same, Forever Changing: The Dilemma Facing Historic Houses” (paper presented at the Athenaeum of Philadelphia Symposium, Philadelphia, Pa., December 1998), 1.



beyond the installation of period rooms. These technologies can be used to create a diachronic effect without losing the inherent interest of watching the workings of a household as it existed at a moment in time. Sites can use computers to create virtual tours of the household at different periods, introduce smells and sounds to make the “moment in time” manner of interpretation come more alive for the visitor, and introduce audio tours that eliminate the difficulties inherent in guide training and supervision.<sup>7</sup> In addition, house museums might install exhibit space that is specifically targeted toward the interpretation of periods that are not covered in the physical installation; rotating exhibits have the potential to attract repeat visitors. In order to present a diachronic sense of a neighborhood over time, adjacent historic house museums that interpret different periods are urged to create programming in tandem to broaden their story and audience base.

In too many cases, diachronic interpretation has become a case of wanting to be everything for everyone. Historic house museums want to show the process of preservation, though many are actually examples of restorative work that does not coincide with today’s accepted preservation practices. They want to show “that a house is an organic thing that continues over time,” but question, “where do you draw the line?” about the number of stories told.<sup>8</sup> They want to be about the object for traditional visitors who expect to see material culture, and thereby to exhibit exceptional pieces of decorative arts. At the same time, they want to be about the story for general visitors, and

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<sup>7</sup> Such audio tours are used quite effectively at the Musee Jacquemart-Andre, a historic house museum in Paris; they also hold the potential for providing visitors the opportunity to choose what themes interest them.

<sup>8</sup> Diethorn, interview.



want that story to relate directly to every possible sort of visitor that might come through their door. It is no coincidence that diachronic interpretation has experienced a surge in popularity at the same time that historic house museums try to diversify their audience.

But by trying so hard, historic house museums may end up failing everyone. In the end, these sites have an obligation to look beyond the latest interpretive trend and think about what qualities set them apart, both from each other and from other categories of museum. Historic house museums are distinguished from period rooms at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or from history museums like the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, by their completeness as tangible records of a household both as it evolved over the years and as it functioned at many moments in time. Understanding these latter moments may ultimately prove more valuable to the public, since an effort to interpret a site's entire history often presents more complications than elucidations. The challenges faced by the museum profession that have led to the emergence of diachronic interpretation are both legitimate and on-going. Rather than following the perceived successes of other sites, however, historic house museums must look inward to acknowledge their own "best."







**Figure 1:** The Lower East Side Tenement Museum is one of a new breed of historic house museums that emphasizes experiential interpretation over collections-based interpretation. Photograph from Ruth J. Abram, "Planting Cut Flowers," *History News* 55, no. 3 (Summer 2000).







**Figure 2:** Wyck, a multi-generational site in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, interprets the accumulated layers of nine generations of a single family. Photograph from Roger W. Moss, *Historic Houses of Philadelphia: A Tour of the Region's Museum Homes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).





**Figure 3:** At the Morris-Jumel Mansion, diachronic interpretation is a byproduct of the site's collections. Eliza Jumel's bedroom is interpreted as such because the Mansion has acquired her suite of furniture; elsewhere, the Revolutionary War period is interpreted when Jumel furniture is not available. Photograph from the Historic House Trust of New York City.





**Figure 4:** The Harrison Gray Otis House is the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities' flagship property and the last remaining freestanding eighteenth-century townhouse in Boston. Photograph from Jane C. Nylander with Diane L. Viera, *Windows on the Past: Four Centuries of New England Homes* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2000).







**Figure 5:** SPNEA originally used the dining room of the Harrison Gray Otis House as an exhibition space. Photograph from James M. Lindgren, *Preserving Historic New England: Preservation, Progressive, and the Remaking of Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).





**Figure 6:** The Spencer-Peirce-Little Farm is typical of SPNEA's properties in that its interpretation follows a "walk through time." This contrasts with the Harrison Gray Otis House, which has been interpreted to one moment in time. Photograph from Jane C. Nylander with Diane L. Viera, *Windows on the Past: Four Centuries of New England Homes* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2000).

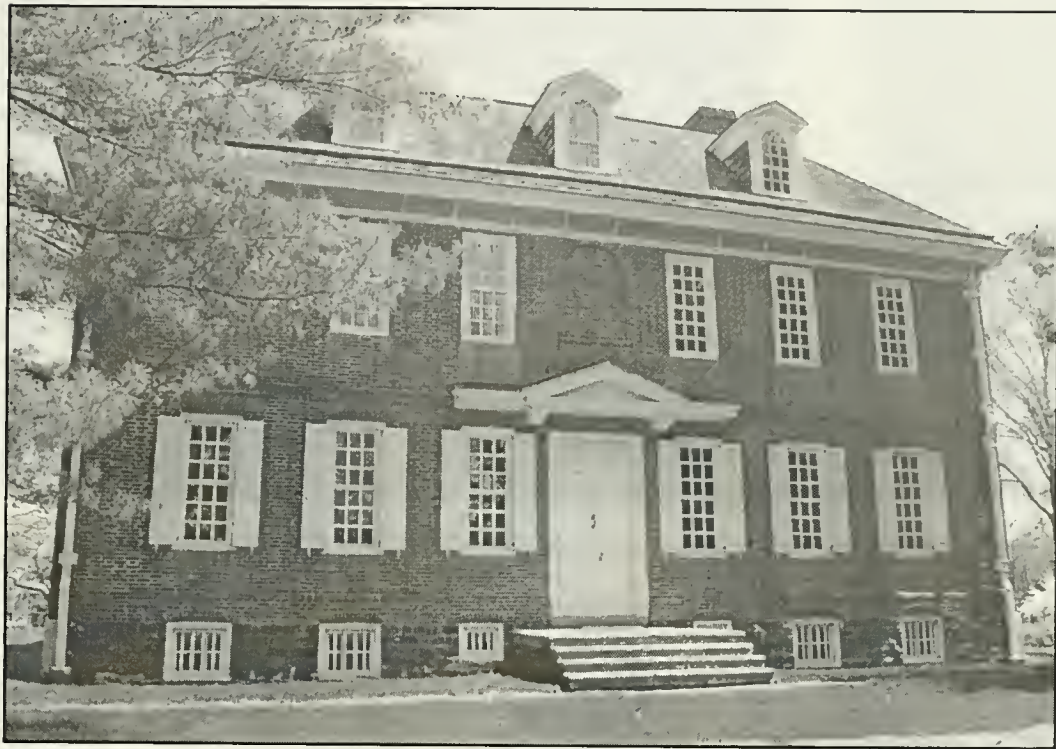




**Figure 7:** The kitchen chamber of the Harrison Gray Otis House, currently interpreted as the Otis' bedchamber, will be reinstalled as a room from a mid-nineteenth century boarding house. Photograph from Jane C. Nylander with Diane L. Viera, *Windows on the Past: Four Centuries of New England Homes* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2000).







**Figure 8:** Hope Lodge, located outside Philadelphia, is now interpreted so that visitors can make a direct comparison between the Colonial and Colonial Revival periods. Photograph from Loretta Treese, *Hope Lodge and Mather Mill: A Pennsylvania Trail of History Guide*. (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2001).







**Figures 9 and 10:** At Hope Lodge, the Samuel Morris parlor, top, and Degn parlor, bottom, are located on opposite sides of the entrance hall. Together, they clearly show the distinction between actual Colonial finishes and the early-twentieth century's conception of that aesthetic. Photographs from Loretta Treese, *Hope Lodge and Mather Mill: A Pennsylvania Trail of History Guide*. (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2001).





**Figure 11:** When SPNEA purchased the Harrison Gray Otis House in 1916, significant exterior alterations to Bulfinch's design had been made. SPNEA immediately began restoring the house to its original appearance; the scars of the nineteenth-century door surround seen here are visible on the restored façade seen in Figure 4. Photograph from James M. Lindgren, *Preserving Historic New England: Preservation, Progressive, and the Remaking of Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).





**Figure 12:** In order to reinstall the Harrison Gray Otis House's parlor chamber as Sally Otis' bedroom, early 19<sup>th</sup>-century scenic wallpaper has been encapsulated under sheetrock using an untested method. A peek panel, shown here, will allow visitors to see a fragment of the scenic paper. Photograph by author.







**Figure 13:** Benjamin Henry Latrobe designed Decatur House in 1818. The National Trust for Historic Preservation is in the process of reinterpreting the site from a diachronic interpretation to one that reflects only one period of the house's ownership. Photograph from Kim Keister, "Influence and Ambition." *Historic Preservation* 47, no. 2 (March-April 1995).





**Figure 14:** The entrance hall of Decatur House reflects Latrobe's original design for the house. Ultimately, the entire site will be restored as closely as possible to Latrobe's design. Photograph from Kim Keister, "Influence and Ambition." *Historic Preservation* 47, no. 2 (March-April 1995).

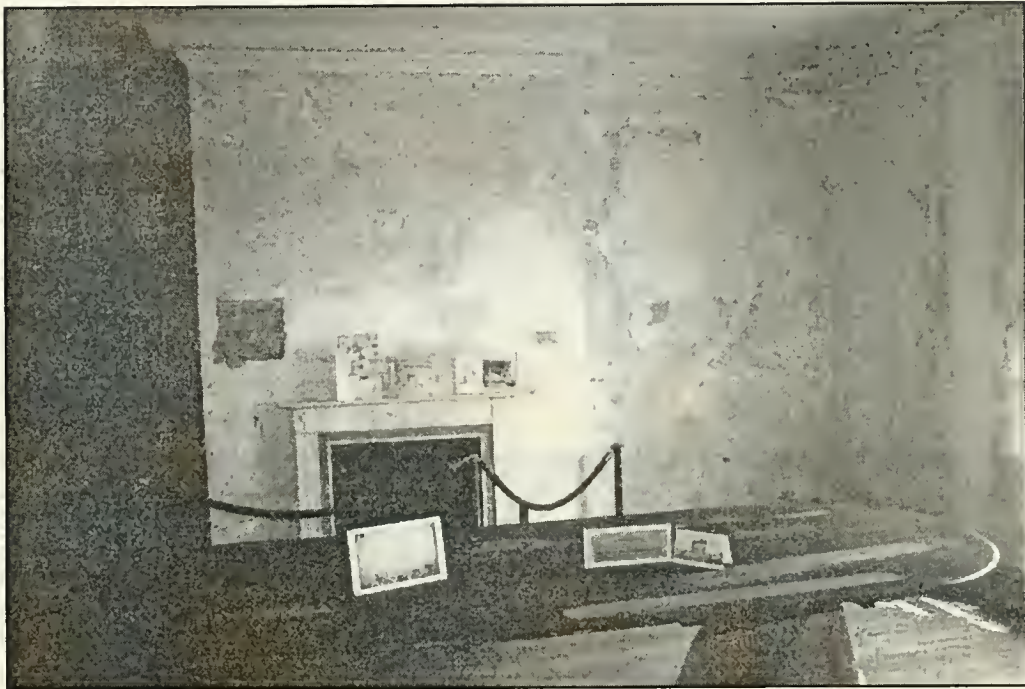




**Figure 15:** Decatur House's second floor drawing room, with its parquet floors and ceiling murals, epitomizes the substantial changes made to the house by Edward and Mary Beale at the end of the nineteenth century. These elements are being encapsulated for protection as part of the restoration of Latrobe's original design for the house. Photograph from Kim Keister, "Influence and Ambition." *Historic Preservation* 47, no. 2 (March-April 1995).







**Figure 16:** The process of restoration is being interpreted in the room recently discovered to be the Decatur House kitchen. Photograph from the Decatur House website, [www.decatourhouse.org/museum/exhibits](http://www.decatourhouse.org/museum/exhibits), 18 April 2002.





**APPENDIX A**

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**HARRISON GRAY OTIS HOUSE VISITOR SURVEY, 1993-1994**

**1. Is this your first visit to the Otis House?**

	Yes	263	(97%)
	No	8	(3%)

**2. How would you rate your visit to the Otis House?**

<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>
0	0	23	109	146
(0%)	(0%)	(8%)	(39%)	(53%)

**3. Which words or phrases best describe the tour at the Otis House? Please circle as many as you would like.**

Entertaining	110	(41%)	Not detailed enough	16	(6%)
Boring	0	(0%)	Too long	12	(4%)
Tiring	11	(4%)	Dry	3	(1%)
Informative	250	(92%)	Typical house tour	30	(11%)
Fun	37	(14%)	Too many facts	1	(0%)
Interesting	208	(77%)	Thought provoking	100	(37%)

**4. Please rate the amount of information provided on each of these topics:**

	<u>Not Enough</u>	<u>Adequate</u>	<u>Too Much</u>
Otis Family at home	27 (10%)	248 (90%)	2 (1%)
Furniture and paintings	42 (15%)	250 (83%)	4 (1%)
Architecture	50 (18%)	220 (80%)	4 (1%)
Running the Otis House	53 (20%)	210 (79%)	4 (1%)
Restoration	43 (10%)	210 (79%)	4 (1%)
Beacon Hill	60 (23%)	200 (77%)	0 (0%)
Otis' political life	62 (25%)	191 (75%)	0 (0%)



**5. Please rate your interest in seeing the following rooms restored and added to the Otis House tour:**

	not interested			very interested	
	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>
Kitchen:	1 (0%)	11 (4%)	24 (8%)	49 (17%)	204 (71%)
Child's Room:	0 (0%)	28 (10%)	50 (17%)	65 (23%)	144 (50%)
Guest Bed Chamber	13 (4%)	57 (19%)	13 (24%)	67 (22%)	89 (30%)
Servant's Room	7 (3%)	14 (5%)	37 (14%)	75 (29%)	130 (49%)
A room from the late 1800s	59 (24%)	33 (13%)	37 (15%)	40 (16%)	81 (32%)

**Would you like to see additional rooms even if it would mean adding more time to the tour?**

Yes	269	(98%)
No	5	(2%)

**6. Please rate the following topics for a future panel exhibition in a new visitor waiting area:**

	not interested			very interested	
	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>
The development of Beacon Hill	0 (0%)	20 (8%)	52 (20%)	78 (30%)	112 (43%)
The restoration process for Otis House	7 (6%)	32 (12%)	49 (18%)	83 (30%)	104 (38%)
The changing neighborhood, 1750s-1950s	4 (2%)	15 (6%)	57 (22%)	82 (31%)	103 (37%)



## 7. How would you rate the following:

	<b>Poor</b>				<b>Excellent</b>	<b>Didn't Use</b>
	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	
Signs to entrance	19 (7%)	32 (12%)	99 (38%)	60 (23%)	26 (10%)	26 (10%)
Waiting area	9 (3%)	31 (12%)	90 (34%)	85 (32%)	27 (44%)	20 (32%)
Restrooms	2 (1%)	13 (5%)	23 (9%)	16 (6%)	14 (5%)	195 (745)
Museum shop	25 (10%)	37 (14%)	78 (30%)	34 (13%)	10 (4%)	76 (29%)

## 8. How did you hear about the Otis House?

Travel guide	112	(48%)	Friend/family	41	(16%)
Newspaper	12	(5%)	SPNEA guidebook	14	(6%)
Signage	12	(5%)	Known for years	33	(14%)
Our brochure	10	(4%)			

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<b>Your gender?</b>	Male	128	(35%)
	Female	236	(65%)

<b>Your age?</b>	Under 25	13	(4%)
	25 – 34	58	(16%)
	35 – 44	75	(21%)
	45 – 54	95	(26%)
	55 – 64	59	(16%)
	65 and over	24	(7%)

<b>Racial/ethnic background?</b>			
	Black	2	(1%)
	Asian	4	(2%)
	Latino	0	(1%)
	White	254	(97%)





<b>Level of education?</b>	Grade school	9	(4%)
	High school	14	(6%)
	College	23	(10%)
	College graduate	95	(40%)
	Graduate school	112	(48%)

**Who came with you?**

Came alone	67	(27%)
With friend	62	(25%)
Bus tour	0	(0%)
Couple	60	(24%)
Family	63	(25%)

**Did you bring any children under 18?**

Yes	18	(7%)
No	238	(93%)

**Are you a member of SPNEA?**

Yes	23	(9%)
No	247	(91%)



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DECATUR HOUSE VISITOR SURVEY, 2001

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**1. What did you find most interesting on your tour?**

- a. "That you're still exploring history to find out what life was like and what the house was like at the time."
- b. "The style changes from the first to second floor; the changes to the house throughout history."
- c. "The pictures of all the owners and renters, the US Army occupation, and the more recent history with the ballroom and the pictures from *Life* magazine."
- d. "The conversion of the house to the Victorian style and back again."
- e. "The original kitchen placement and symmetry/false doors."
- f. "The architecture and history."
- g. "Seeing the changes, especially in the kitchen."
- h. "The chair that turns into steps, the draining dish with grooves, basically the inventive design ideas that no longer exist. Also Marie Beale and the slave history."
- i. "The courtyard and the grounds in back, also the floor woodwork."
- j. "The whole history; the house was on an empty plain."
- k. "The two styles: Decatur and Marie Beale."
- l. "Knowing it was a Federal house and I loved the scale."

**2. What did you find least interesting on your tour?**

- a. "I thought it was all great; the guide motivated people to think about the possibilities and what life was like in those days."
- b. "I found it all interesting."
- c. "It was all interesting."
- d. "I can't really identify anything; I guess all the information about the many tenants."
- e. "The dinnerware in the former bedroom."
- f. "Nothing."
- g. "Nothing."
- h. "The 1950s furniture."
- i. "Nothing; it was a tight tour."
- j. "Nothing."
- k. "The kitchen as it is now."
- l. "Nothing."



### 3. What will you tell a friend about Decatur House?

- a. "Come by and see the house."
- b. "It's great to see how someone lived in various time periods and in Washington's early history; you can get decorating ideas."
- c. "It's in a centralized location, within walking distance from many attractions."
- d. "They should come; it's a lovely example of a private home in D.C."
- e. "They should come; it was obviously a very livable space – I can imagine people living here."
- f. "If they like architecture, they should come here."
- g. "It's something different to do and talks about slavery and architecture."
- h. "First, I would inform them that it exists – that there's a historic house here. Then I would tell them that famous people lived here and little factoids like the party line and the numbers of free blacks vs. slaves."
- i. "Go visit; it's fabulous, brings you back to early Washington."
- j. "It's a good place to learn about the history of the family and Washington."
- k. "It's a nice pass through to see the development of the Washington lifestyle over the last two centuries."
- l. "The Clay connection."

### 4. What was the main idea of your tour?

- a. "There were many owners/occupants; each one changes things; some have more of a sense of history than others."
- b. "The evolution of D.C. history."
- c. "It's an example of how a wealthy person would live in an affluent society and political aspirations."
- d. "The history of the house and its inhabitants."
- e. "The home's history and the people who lived there."
- f. "The history of the house."
- g. "How unique the home is; it was new in its time."
- h. "It's a Federal house; many important people lived here; it's worth preserving."
- i. "The place of Decatur House in American history, its origins and inhabitants, its significance."
- j. "The historical perspective and struggle to keep it preserved."
- k. "The history of the house."
- l. "The two histories: social and architectural. The guide asked me what brought me here, so she geared toward my interests."



**5. What questions did you have that were not answered on your tour?**

- a. "I asked where Mrs. Beale was from and the guide said she'd find out for me."
- b. "None."
- c. "I wanted to know more about the slaves and free blacks and how different areas were affected. And also more about the political influence on society."
- d. "None."
- e. "None."
- f. "None, but I'm going to read more about Decatur."
- g. "None."
- h. "None."
- i. "Nothing really; it was a one-on-one tour, so he [the guide] discussed the nature of the gardens with me afterwards, when I asked."
- j. "None."
- k. "Nothing."
- l. "It was a one-on-one tour, so the guide answered all my questions."

**6. Decatur House is changing its interpretation along with the restoration of the house to the 1820 time period. The plan now is to offer three tours:**

- "Symbolizing Character – Architecture and Consumerism" will discuss the values being formed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (patriotism, liberty, equality, and virtue) and how they are reflected in American architecture (related to Benjamin Henry Latrobe and Decatur House), and the relationship between objects and social standing (related to Susan's decline in status upon the death of Stephen).
- "Capital Contradiction" will identify the existence of slavery at the house and in the nation's capital and the differentiation between urban and plantation slave experiences, discuss the opportunities available to slaves in DC, examine the roles of slaves at the house and in the DC community, and explore Dupuy's lawsuit against Clay and how living in DC impacted that.
- "Refining Society" will identify Decatur House as a prominent location in DC and as the first neighbor to the president, explain how the Decatur's relationship with the Monroes and the choice of Latrobe to design and build their home support their position in society, discuss the tenants of the house and their political and social aspirations, and explore the purposes of the house's design and the entertaining side of the home's inhabitants.

Two ideas for presenting the tours are:

- Offer them by day





- Offer them by time of day

**What do you think of these ideas? Which would you prefer? Why?**

- "The three tours might dilute the power of the house and the story; expand on ideas through diaries of how entertainment and politics shaped history. Also the conditions of the country which put a widow in the position that she had to sell everything – relate to today's widows and the study of women's rights. People will come once and won't have time to come back, so whatever you decide to do, make the message visible easily. It would be easiest to do this with all the tours in the same day."
- "By time of day."
- "Time of day – could you use a coded ticketing system so people would know by the color of their ticket what their tour was?"
- "By time of day – you could take one tour after another."
- "By time of day – it's optional, and you could get as much information as possible in the shortest amount of time."
- "Time of day."
- "All in one day. There is enough to see locally that you could see something else in between the tours you wanted to see. Day passes would be nice."
- "For the viewers, by time of day, but I don't know if they'd stay. For the workers, also by time of day because it would give them variety."
- "All in one day; a small percentage would stick around for another; you could choose a tour and go to the White House while you wait."
- "I would like to get all the information, so I'd get all three tours in one day."
- "The slavery idea sounds good. Historians would be interested. Most people only stay a few days, and they would only be interested in one theme, so offer all themes every day."
- "By time of day. I'd be frustrated if I arrived on the day my theme was not offered."

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**Demographics:**

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Local</b>
a.	Female	70s	No
b.	Female	20s	Yes
c.	Male	50s	No
d.	Female	60s	Yes
e.	Female	60s	Yes
f.	Female	40s	Yes
g.	Female	20s	No
h.	Female	20s	Yes
i.	Male	30s	Yes
j.	Male	50s	No
k.	Female	30s	No
l.	Female	50s	No



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